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FINAL FANTASY XVI

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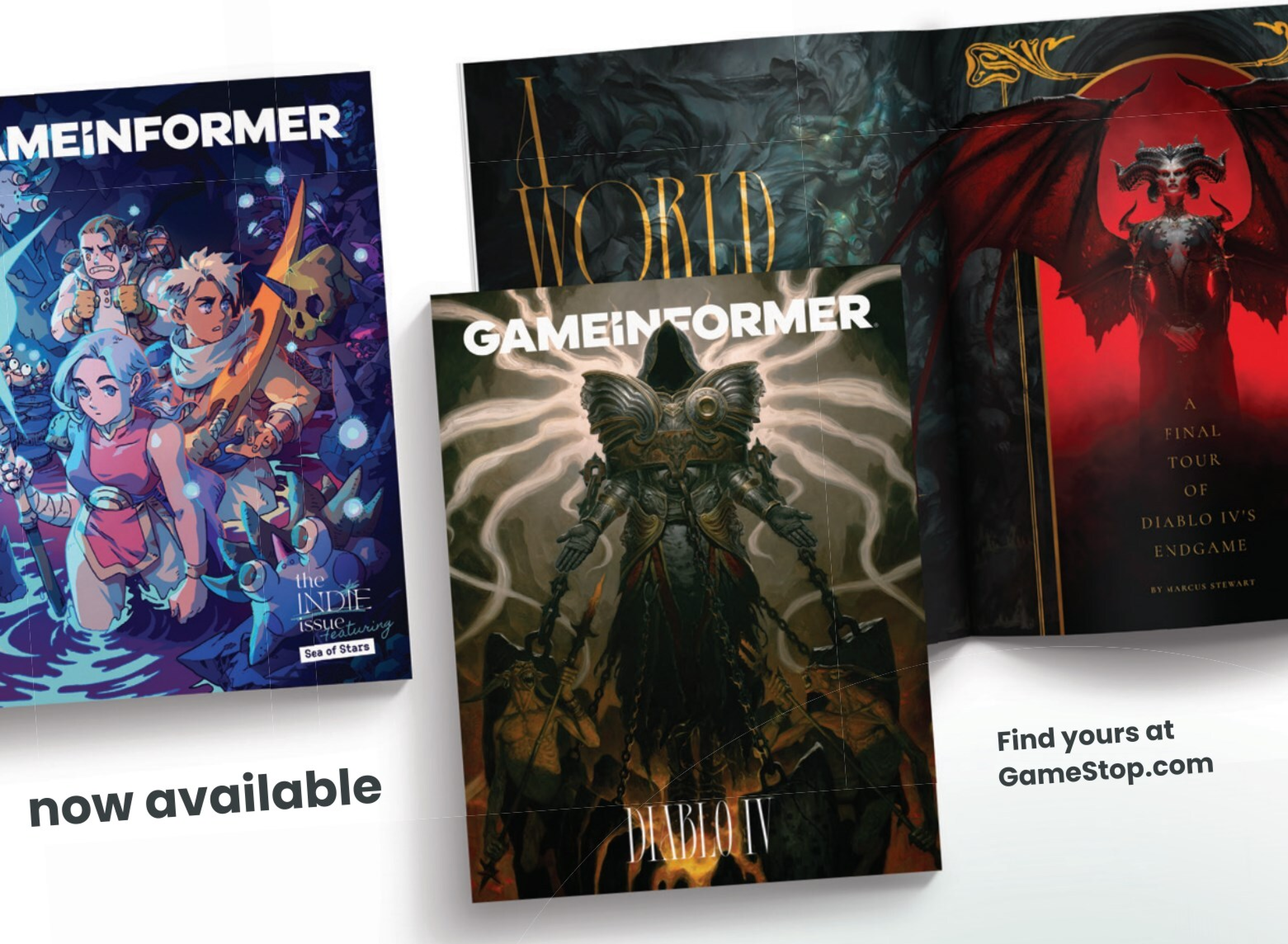
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EDITOR'S NOTE

UNDER REVIEW

IT'S BEEN A SURPRISINGLY BUSY SPRING season for big game releases. Titles like The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, Redfall, and Star Wars Jedi: Survivor are just a few of the major projects that have hit in recent weeks. Some turned out great, and others we liked less; you can read our impressions of each in our review section, beginning on p. 68.

We take the task of evaluating games with as much care as possible. It's a responsibility that goes in two directions. First and foremost, we know readers use those reviews to inform how they spend their time and money, and the things we say can help guide those decisions. That's a big deal. In the other direction, we're acutely aware that the games we write about often represent years of effort and collaboration for the development teams that build them. Whether we love or hate the result, those creators deserve an honest review.

Over the years, I've fielded many questions about what it's like to review games and how we do it. It's always lovely when we receive feedback from readers suggesting we helped guide them to a transformative gaming experience. And I've heard more than my share of insinuations and accusations about how game reviewers must inherently be dishonest, in league with game publishers, or pushing an agenda.

Speaking on behalf of *Game Informer*, the reality is far less nefarious. Put simply, each review we write is an opinion from an individual that aims to offer an honest critique of the game we played.

Is it more complicated than that? Sure. We try our best to assign reviews based on expertise in a genre. Where possible, we research the game ahead of time, and ensure familiarity with the subject matter or franchise. We carefully weigh all the positive and negative aspects and consider how it affects the overall experience.

Ultimately, one person's experience with a game can't encompass every facet of its value or fun, nor can it uncover every glitch or problem that might become apparent after millions of players get their hands on the game post-launch. Nonetheless, we try our best to be thorough and considered in our verdicts.

With all that said, what we hope is a well-educated opinion is just that – an opinion. How do I feel when someone loves a game I didn't enjoy? I'm delighted! We're all into gaming to have a good time, so if someone finds something they treasure, it makes me happy to hear, no matter how I feel about the game.

I hope that, from time to time, the reviews we write offer a new perspective or guide you to something you might otherwise have missed. I love seeing the divergent opinions about each new release; to me, it's a sign of a healthy and robust hobby.

Play well. Be well.

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

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FINAL FANTASY XVI

This month, we traveled to Square Enix's headquarters in Tokyo, Japan, to dive deep into Final Fantasy XVI. Between hands-on access and extensive interviews with the development team, we learned a wealth of new details and insight into the creation of the anticipated game.

Our subscriber edition cover features protagonist Clive Rosfield with the imposing Ifrit Eikon towering behind, while our back cover depicts his young brother Joshua, as the Phoenix hovers in the background. Our gold cover features the two images flipped, which connect seamlessly in either direction, hinting at the unbreakable connection between the two.

GAMEINFORMER

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Charles Harte

Associate Editor

The release of Star Wars: Jedi Survivor has me reminiscing about playing Star Wars: The Force Unleashed as a kid. I especially enjoyed the boss fights, culminating in a series of quick-time events. I played it on the Wii, where QTEs required you to twist the remote to a certain angle – a tricky feat I often failed. I recently learned that on other consoles, you just had to press a button! It was frustrating at times, but I grew to love that final, frantic scramble. It added tension to boss fights that made victory much sweeter.

Wesley LeBlanc

Associate Editor

Writing this cover story is a bit of a full-circle moment for me. Video games were introduced to me by my older brother, hand-me-down style. The SNES wasn't moved to my room until well into the PS1's lifecycle, and I didn't get my hands on the PS1 until well into the PS2's lifecycle. Which is to say, I didn't get to play Final Fantasy VII until my brother was busy playing Final Fantasy XII or X (again). It mattered little; I was just stoked he was sharing his love of this series with me. But look at me now – I played a good chunk of Final Fantasy XVI well before most of the world (including my older brother), and I'm not sure I'd be able to say that today if it wasn't for him.

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Nintendo's commercials in the '90s starred giant costumed versions of its mascots – we talked to the people in the suits to learn how it almost killed one of the creators.

30 **THE HAUNTING CRAFT OF HORROR GAMES**

What are the real-life horrors that haunt the creators of Resident Evil, Fatal Frame, Immortality, and more?

36 **COVER STORY – FINAL FANTASY XVI**

We toured Final Fantasy XVI's opening hours, side content, and endgame to learn more about this new, mainline single-player Final Fantasy game from the team behind one of the most popular MMOs in the world.

50 **HIGHER POWERS**

We spent time at Ascendant Studios, talking to the team, playing its upcoming Call of Duty-inspired magic shooter, and even going to meetings, all in an effort to understand Immortals of Aveum.

78 **I WISH I COULD SEE MYSELF**

For one writer, they've spent much of their life being let down by video game character creators and their lack of BIPOC representation. But some games are starting to get it right – slowly but surely.

regulars

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Replies

THE MARIO CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

I am a 41-year-old female gamer who's been playing video games since arcades and Atari were a thing. Mario is one of my favorite franchises. I remember when all the kids at daycare and school wanted an NES. I remember the travesty that was the live-action Mario movie from the '90s; it was the very first movie I got angry at, and my parents were angry because my brother and I were angry. So, I was a bit nervous when the new Super Mario Bros. movie was announced, but since Nintendo was directly involved, I was still hopeful.

Needless to say, when I finally got to see the movie last month, I did my best to not go all fangirl in the movie theater. The reference that got me laughing the most was mentioning how we used to blow into the NES games (and SNES games) to see if they would work. It was like Nintendo remembered us OG fans. As long as Nintendo stays in charge, I'll fully support future releases. I am sure we can expect Zelda and Metroid at some point. Definitely DK – I'd love to see King K. Rool and Bowser on the big screen together. Probably get Kirby too, and it could all culminate into a Smash Bros. movie. Which Nintendo franchises do you think they might do? **– Tiffany via email**

↳ *While people have been critical of the story of* The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, there's a reason it crossed the billion-dollar mark at the box office. Yes, Mario is among the most recognizable and enduring characters on the planet, but as the 1993 film showed, that matters little if the fans of the series don't feel seen. In the early to mid-aughts, comic-book movies started giving readers something approximating the adventures they experienced in the pages of their favorite comics, and look what that did for that subset of films.*

*When we spoke with the directors of T*he Super Mario Bros. Movie*, they told us they think the people behind the early video game adaptations understood that games were cool and popular, but they didn't understand* why *games were cool and popular. Clearly, Illumination did and gave longtime Mario players the adaptation that respected their fandom through various decades.*

As for what we think is next, Nintendo has always been unpredictable, but we'd be shocked if we never saw a Zelda adaptation of some sort, and an atmospheric Metroid movie would be amazing. But the immediate focus will likely be on Mario-adjacent films – maybe a Luigi's Mansion or Donkey Kong Country project. Of course, with the numbers The Super Mario Bros. Movie *has put up, a second mainline film is inevitable.*

RECALIBRATING THE REMAKES

The Dead Space remake has been resoundingly successful. A remake of Dead Space 2 would make sense (and do you think they will?). But, if they do decide to remake DS2, they are kind of setting a precedent, so do you think they would keep going through DS3? It was poorly received, but do you think a remake could fix all the issues gamers had with it while still remaining basically similar to the original game? Or would they just stop at DS2? **– Brian via email**

↳ *EA's remake of Dead Space from earlier this year proved successful with critics and fans, but the initial sales numbers – while strong – fell shy of the publisher's lofty expectations. While the NPD reports it's still one of the top-selling games of 2023, it appears EA had higher hopes. Still, it has restored enough community goodwill that maybe EA wants to continue riding that wave with a remake of the arguably more popular second game.*

When you look at the trilogy as a whole, Dead Space 3 certainly is the outlier. However, remaking it to address the various criticisms would be a much heavier lift since one of the big problems is its prioritization of action over horror. Still, if EA does end up remaking Dead Space 2 and receives enough love, acclaim, and, most importantly, money, a remake sure seems like a perfect excuse for a studio to make tweaks it deems necessary to give fans the trilogy conclusion they always wanted.

ITERATION OVER INNOVATION

Do we think it is the end of an era for quality games at a good quantity? It seems as though development cycles are way too long, and quality games are delivered way too far and few between with significant delays. Whether it be funding, staffing, or reduced talent that is not in the pipeline or because not enough people are entering the industry, it seems to be the end of good quality console games.

This generation has been extremely painful to this point, and barely any true next-gen games with extremely long wait times between. Seems as though it is not worth it to purchase a console anymore. This generation also focused too much on cross-gen games due to the lack of consoles because of the chip shortage and worldwide issues related to supply chain. I believe the best days are behind us in console gaming, with not enough developers and too much turmoil. **– Paul via email**

↳ *While you are correct there's a greater emphasis on cross-generation games with the current consoles, remember that we have been operating under the extraordinary circumstances of the global pandemic, complete with its supply chain and economic consequences. With the new consoles less attainable than their predecessors, fewer publishers are willing to jump in with both feet to create a new-gen-only title, even years into the generation.*

However, consoles are now much more readily available, and you can see the results in the number of new-gen-only games *on the horizon, as titles like Star Wars Jedi: Survivor and the Dead Space remake fully embrace the newer consoles, while other titles, like Hogwarts Legacy and Marvel's Midnight Suns, prioritized getting the new-gen versions onto store shelves and delaying the last-gen versions. Add in the fact that even cross-gen games often run better on the newer machines, and there are ample reasons to upgrade. The days of a massive leap forward, as we saw from Super Nintendo to Nintendo 64, are likely over, but the benefits are there.*

And as for the fear that we've already seen the best days of console games, we'd argue the opposite. Yes, development cycles can be super long, and it sometimes seems like publishers aren't willing to take as many risks as they once did, but the number of amazing games that hit most years is more than most people can reasonably keep up with.

Soundoff: Most Exciting Release

We asked our readers and community what was the most excited they've ever been for a game. Here are some of the answers we received!

I remember being super excited for Pokémon Moon, and I was excitedly waiting outside a GameStop in a local mall I like going to. I was super hyped for it on release, and I ended up loving it. I legit don't think my hype levels have matched since. **– AmethystLeslie via email**

Absolutely has to be Majora's Mask. I grew up on the original Zelda game with my brother, but Ocarina of Time was the one that felt like my Zelda game. Leading up to MM, I remember reading all the coverage I could and playing it on the demo kiosk at Toys "R" Us, where you had to lean waaaaaay back to see the screen. I saved up money for the game and came home from school on launch day to find... that my brother hadn't picked it up like I thought he was going to. I'm pretty sure we went and got it that night, but the few moments of running up to the driveway to realizing that the game wasn't there was the biggest emotional rollercoaster I'd ever experienced in my tiny life. **– troytlepower via Discord**

Has to be The Witcher 3! I have never been one to go to the midnight releases, but I was there in line to pick up my copy. I also took the day off from work to fully be able to dive in! **– via Instagram**

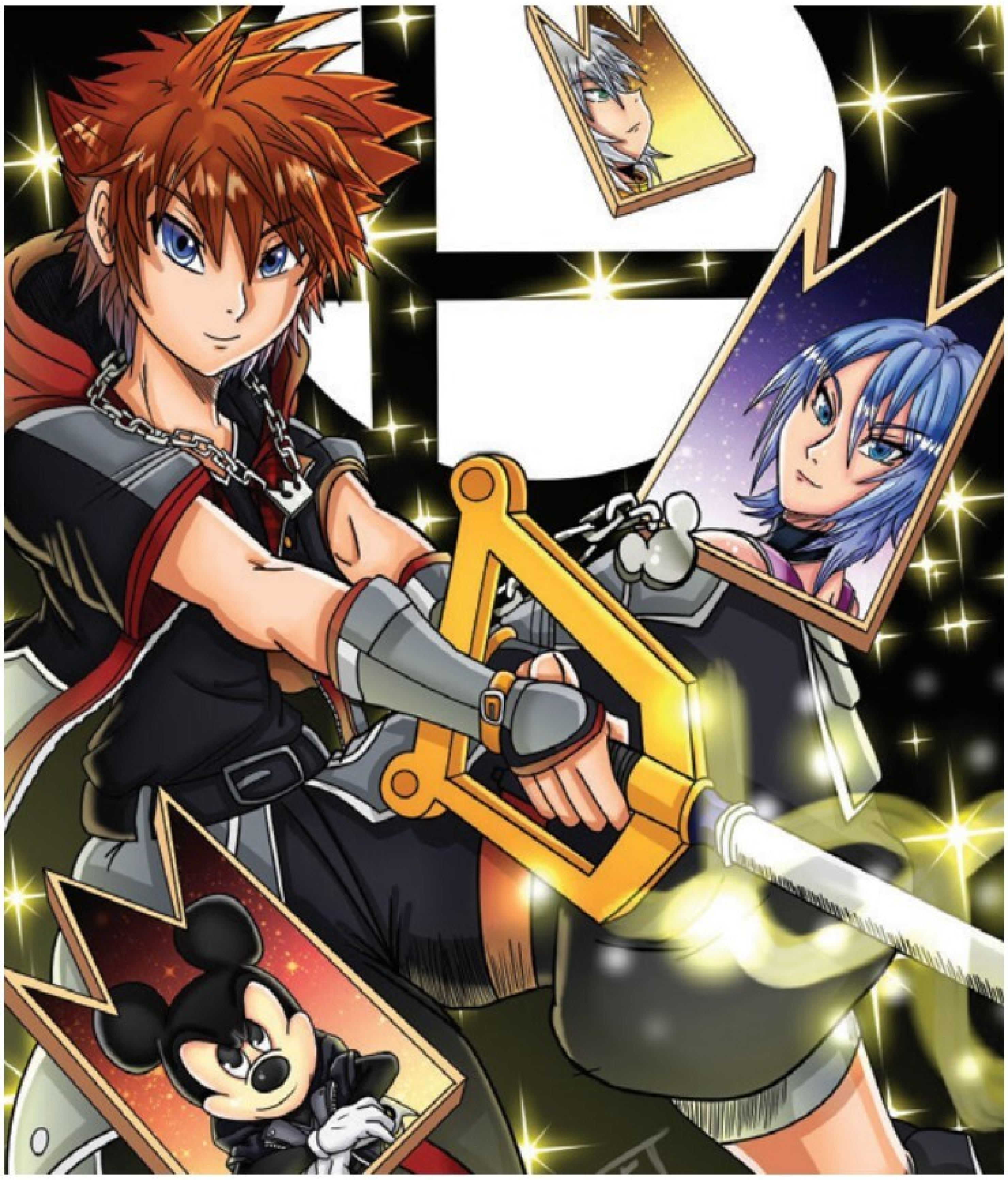
Either Halo 3 or Modern Warfare 2. Halo probably wins, but Modern Warfare 2 was special because it was the first year my age group was old enough to do midnight releases without our parents. My birthday was the night of, and it was such a cool feeling to be in that crowded line with everyone hyped/talking s---. I remember I even downloaded the level-up noises as my ringtone. Fun times! **– via Facebook**

Honestly, I think it was when Elden Ring was about to come out. I had recently played most of the other Soulsborne games, including Bloodborne, which I was obsessed with, so when new trailers and info started dropping for Elden Ring, I was beyond excited about it. I even pre-ordered the game (something I never ever do normally) because I had no doubt that it would be amazing. Though even back then, I had no idea that it would be this amazing. The day before it arrived, I was so excited I could barely sleep, and I'm 24 years old! **– VasilisT. via email**

The Pulse

We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. Star Wars Jedi: Survivor NEW
2. Resident Evil 4 ▼1
3. Horizon Forbidden West ▲1
4. Hogwarts Legacy ▼2
5. Resident Evil 2
6. Call of Duty: Warzone 2.0
7. Dead Island 2 NEW
8. God of War Ragnarök
9. Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order
10. The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild



Reader art winner: Alexandar Robinson

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GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers getting information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the video game industry.

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THE LEGEND OF
ZELDA
TEARS OF THE K

4

5
ASCENDANT
STUDIOS

1.

When Final Fantasy XIV/XVI composer Masayoshi Soken asked Wesley to take a funny picture, he knew the only correct response was to oblige

2.

While in New York, Alex visited Nintendo World New York to see the replica of Mario's shoes from *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*

3.

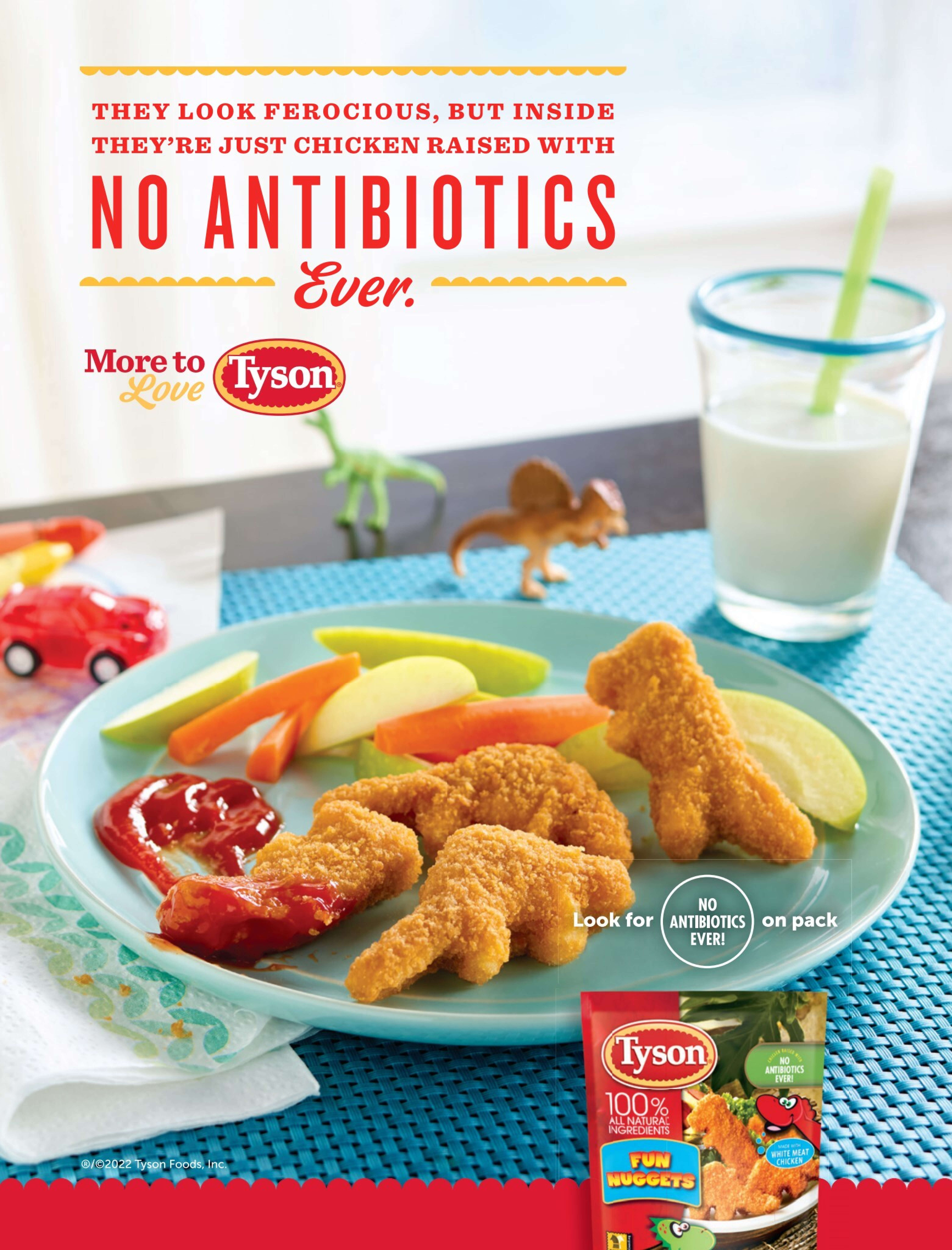
No matter how hard he tried, Brian just couldn't master Link's new Recall ability in real life

4.

Brian recently visited New York, and while he was there, he grabbed some pizza with former *Game Informer* editor Jay Guisao

5.

We traveled to Ascendant Studios in San Rafael, California, to get first hands-on with Immortals of Aveum. Check out our full thoughts on the promising magic-based FPS on p. 50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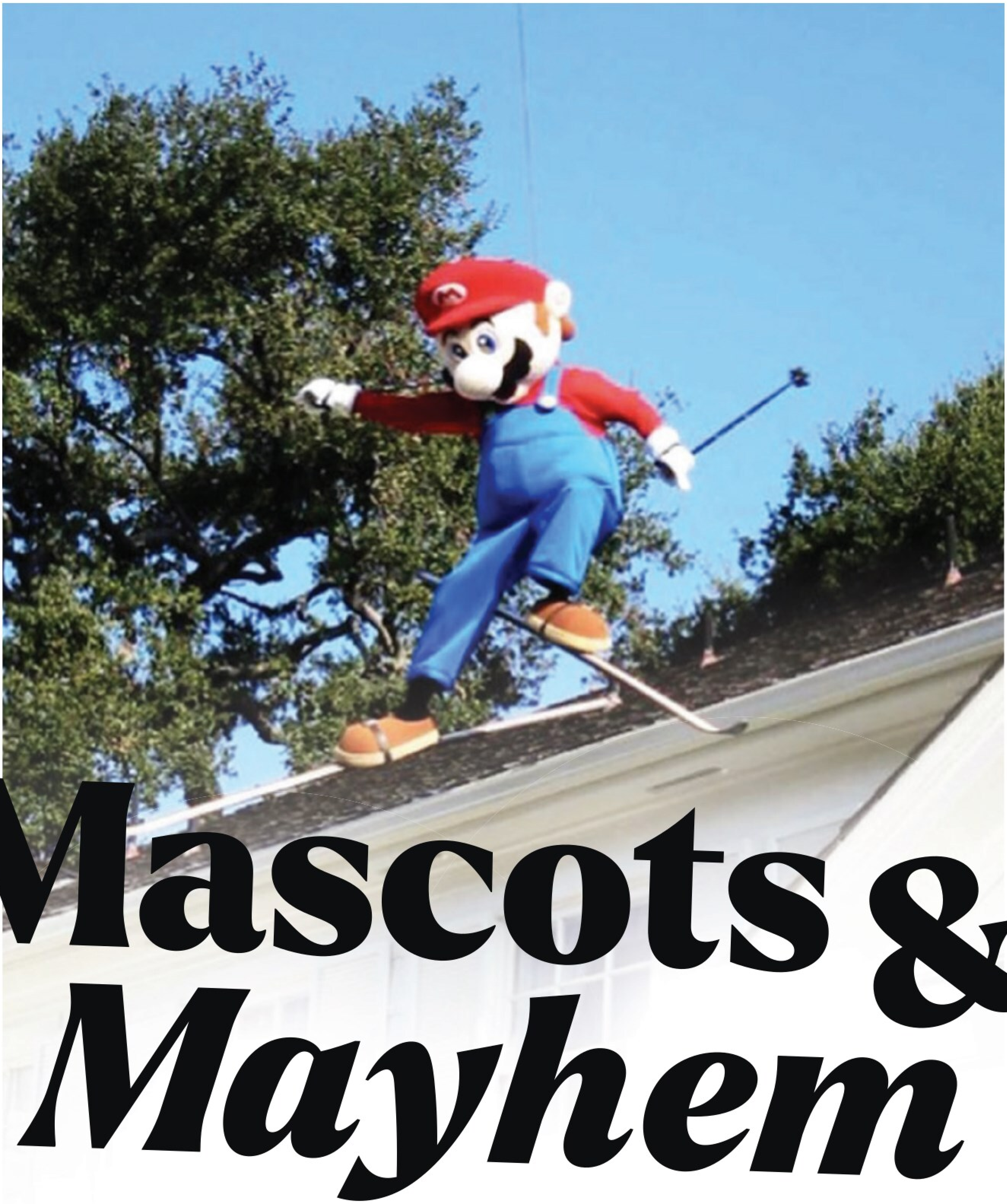

Mascots & Mayhem

Behind the dangerous stunts of Nintendo's iconic Mario commercials

BY ALEX VAN AKEN

“I was raising my hand as if to say, **‘I’m about to die; someone save me,’**” Tim “Fireball” Lawrence says. He was about to drown in a swimming pool. While wearing a **Yoshi costume**, no less.

“The head was vacuum-formed, but Yoshi’s whole body was solid foam,” adds Kathy Lawrence, the costume designer responsible for creating the mascots for dozens of Nintendo’s TV spots in the ’90s and 2000s.

“It went from a costume that weighed about 35 pounds to over 200 pounds,” Fireball says. “The foam, like a sponge, just absorbed the water, and I just started to sink.” Mistaking his outreached hand for a thumbs up, Kathy and the crew were excited as they watched her husband fight for his life underwater.

Fireball never trained to be a stuntman. He’s an illustrator, supporting Kathy’s costume business, KCL Productions, since they were both laid off from Disney in the ’90s. For over a decade, the couple traveled the world designing mascots for Nintendo’s commercials, including Super Smash Bros., Animal Crossing, Banjo-Tooie, Kirby, and several Mario spin-offs. Kathy crafted all the costumes while Fireball quietly donned her creations, acting in almost every commercial they worked on.

“I can think of a lot worse ways to go, I suppose,” Fireball says while chuckling, reflecting on what it’d be like to die on the set of a Mario Party 4 commercial. At the time, he claims he was more concerned with ruining a million-dollar television spot than his well-being.

“Now [I’m] freaking out because we don’t know if we can get the water out by the next day to do the shoot,” he continues. “All these people are flying from all over the planet to come here to do their job. And we’re not going to hold that up. And the one thing you learn by working in the film industry is that you don’t have anyone tell you that you’ll never work in this town again; you just create that situation for yourself by something not working when you come to set.”

Safety was a primary concern for the crew, but the danger was a natural part of the business. In the same commercial, a stuntman flew off a roof on skis dressed as Mario. “You just make it work,” Kathy says.

According to the Lawrences, they used mascots in ways no one had ever done. The two helped one of the most successful video game companies reach a new generation of kids, now comprising a large portion of the company’s fanbase two decades later. And they did it quietly from their backyard in Santa Monica, California.

DESIGNING ICONS

A few years after establishing their company, an ad agency called Leo Burnett Worldwide approached Kathy and Fireball to work on the very first Super Smash Bros. commercial. Set to The Turtles’ “Happy Together,” the promotional video mashes up N64 gameplay clips with footage of mascots – Mario, Yoshi, Donkey Kong, and Pikachu – beating the hell out of each other on a grassy field.

A large film crew, led by director Mark Story [*Saturday Night Live* Season 11], completed the half-day shoot at Walt Disney Studios' ranch in California. While the production was far less intensive than later commercials that the Lawrences worked on, it was their first time working with Nintendo, which, according to the couple, was very strict about how its characters were portrayed.

"I say this with a fair amount of confidence: Kathy has built hundreds, if not thousands, of mascots since the early '70s, and one of the most difficult costumes – if not the most difficult – was Pikachu," Fireball says. "It's hard because you're taking the ergonomics of a character that's an inch tall, like Mario, and then you're trying to fit a human inside this character. And they were extremely strict, but at the same time, also very understanding that the mascots were meant to be farcical and funny, matching the flavor of the game."

Kathy designed Pikachu to fit actress Cindy Sorenson [*Star Trek: The Next Generation*], who was roughly 3 feet tall, while a 7-foot-tall man wore the Donkey Kong suit. "That little lightning bolt on her back had to be perfect. 'No, no. I think you should move it down an eighth of an inch,'" Kathy yells, imitating one of the producers they worked with.

Despite the chaos, the two describe Nintendo and Leo Burnett Worldwide as "amazingly talented, creative, and professional to work with." Super Smash Bros. began a long, fruitful partnership between the parties.

KCL Productions shuffled through several actors to find folks comfortable with mascot acting. Most caused problems or delays on set, citing claustrophobia, heat, and asthma attacks as hindrances.

"After the Super Smash Bros. commercial, I realized I needed people to try the costumes I designed, so I asked Fireball to try them on," Kathy says. "And because of that, he was so good at knowing how far a costume could go and how to make it alive. So, in the rest of the commercials, he was always Super Mario and Yoshi."

"I just knew that if I wore the costume, not only do we get paid more, which was a plus, but we're not going to have any problems because I'm not going to complain," Fireball says.

For years, due to his contract with Nintendo, he couldn't tell anyone he was Super Mario and Yoshi in Nintendo's commercials. When filming near the public, his contract prohibited him from removing the mask – something he could only do behind closed doors.

Following the success of the Super Smash Bros. shoot, KCL Productions followed Nintendo worldwide, filming on cruise ships in Greece, soundstages across the United States and Canada, and on the beaches of St. Thomas.

BY LAND AND BY SEA

"We shot one commercial in the Virgin Islands, and it was an interesting experience with Kathy, my wife, and her ex-husband, Bob, who was acting as Luigi," Fireball says about working on "Mario Vacation," the codename of a 2001 Super Mario Advance 2 ad. "Bob and I ran down the beach together like best buddies dressed as Super Mario and Luigi. We get along great, and we all have a son together, but it was a surreal experience to be running down the beach in the Virgin Islands as these characters. It afforded us some unique experiences."

Though it featured Yoshi running alongside wildlife in a safari-like setting, which the crew filmed on a horse treadmill in Hollywood, the commercial focused mainly on the swimming mechanics in Super Mario Advance 2 – the Super Mario World port on Game Boy Advance. The director, Graham Henman [Anthony Bourdain's *Bone in the Throat*], decided to film with an underwater camera to replicate the game's water levels. Kathy built two Mario mascots to accommodate the production, designing a standard one and another for filming beneath the Caribbean waves.

"We had to build a Super Mario mascot with bulged cheeks that [looked like it] could hold its breath underwater," Fireball says. "I had to get down in the water, put the head on, put my mouth around a straw that we built into the costume's face, blow bubbles out of it, and then pull the head off to come up and get air. It was pretty hairy just to get that one shot right."

However, when submerged in water in pre-production, Kathy and Fireball discovered an unforeseen problem with the Mario costume. A material often found in boogie boards, L200 EVA foam, comprised several of the suit's body parts, so Fireball's positive buoyancy prevented him from swimming underwater. "We added dive weights to the head and feet to create zero buoyancy, allowing me to swim underwater and blow bubbles out of the mouthpiece without fighting the head and feet that wanted to surface," Fireball says.

"There were a lot of firsts, and it was exciting to be a part of them because it was a combination of excitement and terrifying fear," he continues. "You know that you may not make it through the shoot and that this may be your last day on earth. No one had ever really put a mascot in a swimming pool and had them swim before. Or in the ocean. I don't think anyone up until Banjo-Tooie had ever considered jumping out of an airplane at 12,000 feet while wearing a mascot. That's just not something that anyone had ever done before."

"I've worked for a lot of costume companies. And I can say nobody had ever done these things," Kathy confirms.

NUTS & BOLTS

If there was one thing Kathy was terrified of on the set of Nintendo's Banjo-Tooie taping, it was breaking someone's neck.

The premise of the ad's story was to cheekily showcase what would happen if Banjo tried flying but forgot his bird partner, Kazooie, and it concluded with the protagonist crashing into the earth. Effectively, they were creating a live-action cartoon scene. The Lawrences built two versions of the Banjo Kazooie costume: one for a person skydiving from a moving plane and the other for a six-story crane to drop with a 200-pound dummy inside. Kathy was worried the weight of the foam head could paralyze the stuntman if something went wrong.

"I said, 'You tell me what you need: holes in the head or whatever,'" Kathy says. "The guy's like, 'No problem.' So he did a couple of jumps out of the airplane first with the costume on but only holding the head." The designer integrated all of the standard skydiving equipment into the piece, including a special helmet, so the performer was dressed appropriately in case of an emergency.

Back on the ground, the crew's first unit had successfully dropped the dummy Banjo from the sky and was busy digging a hole into the dirt that fit the bear character's snout. However, the problem was that the impact shattered the insides of the mascot's head. Notably, Fireball still had to get inside for the last shot of a face-down Banjo raising its hand with a thumbs-up. "We've thrown it over the side so many times there are all these sharp shards broken in the face," Fireball says, adding that spiders had also crawled into the mask while lying on the ground.

Despite how unpleasant that description sounds, Fireball remembers Nintendo understanding that the mascots were the commercial's stars, and because of that, the company treated the couple "like gold."

PASSING THE TORCH

Despite the danger, wild stunts, and long days, the Lawrences view their decade with Nintendo as creatively rewarding. They describe their collaborators and clients as only being professional and generous to their family-run business. Notably, fans still enjoy the publisher's memorable commercials to this day. The Super Smash Bros. commercial is nearing 5,000,000 views since a copy was first uploaded to YouTube in 2008 by user PSNDarkKnight01.

"Kathy is a good example of someone that didn't question whether anything was possible," Fireball says.

"Our son is a sculptor in the movie industry," Kathy says. "He worked on *Black Panther*, and he's working on Star Wars right now. I told him, 'When you have a difficult or dangerous situation, or when you have to pour in so many hours [at work] – those are going to be your stories.' You don't want life just to be ho-hum, you know? So now he's picking up the torch."

"We were very grateful to be able to participate," she continues. "And now there's such a love for these traditional costumes. We've had so many people reach out to us about our commercials and say, 'Hey, you should do those commercials again!' It'd be great, but you know, you can't really bring back the '90s." ■

TOP FIVE

FINAL FANTASY WORLDS

Each Final Fantasy installment carries over some critical elements but transplants them into a vibrant and memorable new fictional setting. Here are our favorites

BY MATT MILLER

1 From the tropical beaches of Besaid to the mysterious ruins of Zanarkand, **Spira** was a breathtaking setting that leaned into the dreamlike nature of Final Fantasy X's storytelling and was seemingly inspired in part by Southeast Asian island geography. The vibrant colors and outfits added to the sense of a mystical and magical world welcoming players into a totally new fantasy.

2 The sixth mainline installment shocked players with a twist partway through the adventure when the villainous Kefka threw the world into misalignment, transforming the troubled but beautiful World of Balance into a **World of Ruin**. This cataclysmic event reshaped the planet and left players to rediscover a dramatically altered setting that spoke powerfully to themes of devastation and loss.

3 The impressive variation and breadth of Final Fantasy XIV's MMO world are enough to earn it praise. Even in its maligned earlier version, **Eorzea** ably tapped into familiar tropes, creatures, and crystal iconography to ground the experience. But after the calamity brought on by Bahamut (and the game's connected reboot), it became an increasingly rewarding world filled with political complexity, richly imagined cultures, and captivating natural beauty.

4 The environmental themes of Final Fantasy VII were rooted in the juxtaposition of Midgar's oppressive smoke and metal and the surrounding green and beautiful countryside of **Gaia**. Upon the game's initial release, the futuristic and modern elements were a significant departure for the series but helped to chart a course for the franchise's future, proudly declaring that the fantasy could transport players to all sorts of imagined places and times.

5 If earlier games in the series seemed inspired by real-world locales, the 13th mainline entry stood out for its truly alien and fanciful setting of **Gran Pulse**. The biodome of Cocoon floats above the feared planet below, but both were united by artistic arches and organic shapes that made for an unforgettable and unusual departure from expectation. ■

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Stay charged, play longer. The GameStop Play and Charge Battery Kit for PS5 features a 1400mAh capacity battery for all day, non-stop gaming. Each battery pack provides up to 30 hours of gaming with a full charge. The USB-C port allows you to play while charging and charges your PS5 controller to 100% within 4 hours.

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SKU 346206

GameStop's Nintendo Switch and Nintendo Switch OLED compatible dock features charging, display output, and Game Cube controller connectivity. Unlike the bulky and cumbersome original dock, GameStop's compact design allows for convenient on-the-go gaming.

GameStop Cooling Stand with Controller Charging Function for Xbox Series S
SKU 346147

The Cooling Stand for XBOX Series S with controller charging function ensures high-strength strength dual fans keep the console cool. Stand Improves operational life span and is equipped with a convenient USB Type-C power source and dual charging stations with LED charge indicators.

GameStop

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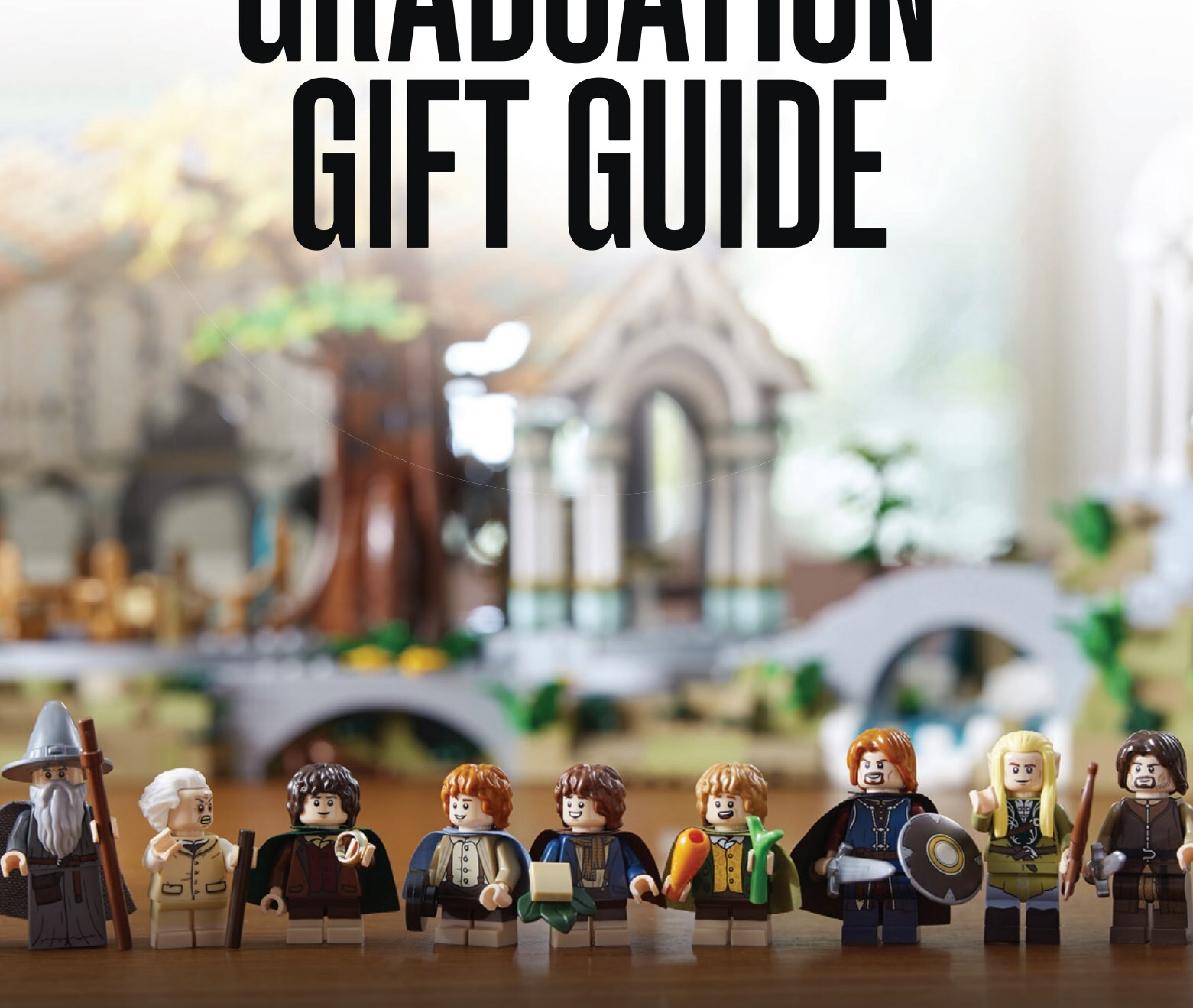
GRADUATION GIFT GUIDE



As another school year winds down, a new class of graduates is set to move to the next phase, and both congrats and gifts are in order. If you're looking for something special for the grad in your life, read ahead to explore a curated collection of toys, tech, tabletop games, and more – from modest to extravagant – sure to please any enthusiast and celebrate their accomplishments.

BY MATT MILLER

For the board
gaming fan
1
2
3
4

❶ LEGO THE LORD OF THE RINGS: RIVENDELL

Double dip into your graduate's interests with one of the best Lego sets in recent memory, celebrating one of the most astonishing locales from the Middle-earth films. 15 minifigures let builders recreate favorite scenes, with tiny details like Bilbo's optional angry grasping face, the council around the Ring, and Elrond's study filled with Elvish art. Lavish and complex, it's a wonderful choice for a shared family build or a lone Ranger from the North who can't wait to return home.

$500 | *lego.com*

❷ POP! GAMES: POKÉMON PIKACHU WAVING

As your student moves on to a new phase, the Pokémon franchise has also come to a moment of transition. Wave goodbye to Ash and Pikachu's longrunning storyline with this adorable Funko Pop! of the foundational character. Funko's stable of unmistakable Pokémon figures continues to expand, so there should be no shortage of company for the little yellow guy.

$13 | *funko.com* | *gamestop.com*

❸ SHOWDOWN PRO GAMING CHAIR

While the Showdown Pro Gaming Chair is an excellent at-desk solution, it's specifically built for the tabletop gaming audience. Without side arms, it's meant to scoot easily underneath a table when not in use. Smooth height adjustment, seat back recline, and 360-degree swivel help to dissuade sore backs for even the longest board game or RPG session.

$379 | *gametheorytables.com*

❹ EARTH

This tableau engine-building board game is a fascinating departure from expectations. Players work to grow an ecosystem through an overwhelming variety of hundreds of included cards, gradually seeing the way that each plant and element of nature feeds on and interacts with others. Beyond some clear environmental themes, Earth is just plain fun, with relatively simple rules but so many options that understanding and forming a coherent strategy will take time. If that sort of complexity appeals, rooted in a focus on natural beauty, then this one should be a winner at your table.

$50 | *insideupgames.com*

Disclaimer: Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop

For your family game night

❶ PLAY ARTS KAI JACK GARLAND

While opinions diverge widely on Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin, the imposing design of its armored lead is an undisputed win. Jack Garland appears here wrapped in black and violet armor, lined in burnished gold. His massive sword (character height) and wire-supported fabric cloak allow for dramatic posing opportunities. Play Arts Kai is known for its detail and precision; this rendition of Garland is one of the most striking pieces from the line in a long time.

$240 | *store.na.square-enix-games.com*

❷ MISTS OVER CARCASSONE

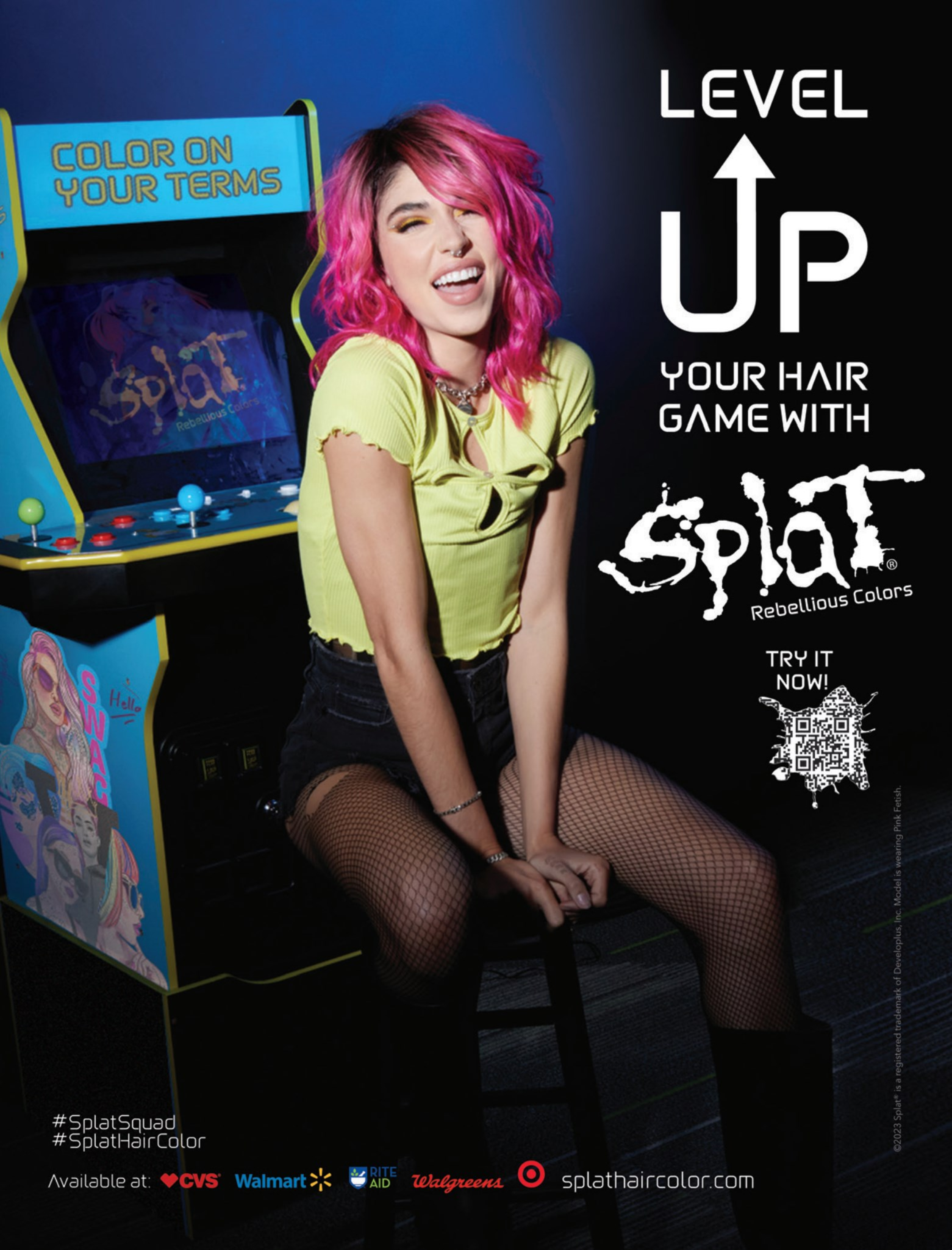
One of the most popular and enduring thematic board games of all time is given new life in this cooperative twist on the familiar Carcassonne formula. The tile-laying fundamentals echo the original game, but in this version, players must work together to manage the spread of ghosts across the countryside and village. Fantastic landscape art and dozens of tiny meeples help the game look great on the table. This new take on the classic maintains the simple-to-learn but hard-to-master elements that have kept the original game on tables for over two decades.

$40 | *zmangames.com*

❸ INFINITY GAME BOARD

After the release of an earlier and larger free-standing table, the new 18.5-inch Infinity Game Board is built as a family-friendly way to enjoy an impressive collection of simple and familiar board games on a digital touchscreen setup. Classic go-to options like Battleship, Candy Land, Sorry!, and Simon are free, while some more involved games like Pandemic and Ticket to Ride have a small price for purchase. The screen is bright and the user interface easy to use. For the younger set of graduates in your family, it's a fun and simple way to approximate the real tactile games and build up an impressive collection to switch between with ease on game night.

$500 | *infinitygametable.com*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splathaircolor.com

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❶ WOLVERINE V2 PRO PS5 CONTROLLER

Razer earns its claims for strong competitive performance with the V2 Pro, which is a standout wireless performer. The quick-firing triggers and tactile action buttons are instantly reactive and feel clicky and responsive to the press. It's also a controller that rests comfortably in-hand, with textured hand grips and a broader contoured curve that fits larger hands well. Razer's signature RGB lighting is also built-in. The offset left thumbstick (like a standard Xbox controller) is a departure from form, but a great variation to find in an officially licensed PS5 device. There's no shortage of extra inputs to set with four rear paddles and additional shoulder buttons. And interchangeable thumbstick caps let you adjust your preferred concave/convex preference. You'll miss out on any rumble or adaptive trigger inclusions, but if those aren't a priority, this is a control option that earns its high price tag.

$250 | *razer.com* | *gamestop.com*

Start a
new collection

❷ D&D WARDUKE ACTION FIGURE

A callback to some of the earliest toys and established characters in D&D fiction of the '80s, Warduke was a fighter from the early Greyhawk campaign setting who turned evil. His distinctive helmet design was a memorable aspect of those days in the role-playing game. This detailed 7-inch scale figure excellently captures the colorful character, and comes complete with an impressive array of weapons and other accessories, including a flaming sword option. Warduke is among the first of a new line of D&D Ultimate figures, so he might not have to stand alone on a shelf for long.

$35 | *shop.wizkids.com*

❸ BROKEN COMPASS

This fast-playing and engaging tabletop role-playing game leaves complicated rules by the wayside and opts instead for high pulp adventure, dice-throwing, and storytelling in the style of great adventure films like Indiana Jones or The Mummy. The game is a laudable choice for an easy departure from more recognizable systems, thanks to a simple core mechanic (rolling matching sets in a dice pool), and familiar character archetypes that everyone can embrace for quick and fun-to-play one-shots or short campaigns.

$50 | *shop.asmodee.com*

❹ FLYER CRUISER ELECTRIC BIKE

While Flyer has a selection of larger cargo bikes for hauling kids or heavy loads, its latest Cruiser line is more squarely targeted at folks looking for a comfortable and enjoyable ride that meets the twin goals of exercise or ample power assist, depending on your mood after class. The rear rack is large enough to support several optional accessories, including a waterproof storage case for keeping electronics or food confidently dry. The classic bike styling is available in either a traditional or step-through design, and exhibits strong performance across the board, from its disc braking to 350W brushless hub motor to solid battery life. It's an ideal option for anyone looking for a fun way to get around.

$1,799 | *flyer.radioflyer.com*

❺ ASUS ROG FLOW Z13-ACRNM

ASUS is known for its experimental approach to tech design, and that reputation continues in this team-up with the Acronym apparel design team. This hybrid tablet/laptop features hefty specs for gaming or any other activity, and includes a 13.4 inch Nebula display, 13th Gen Intel Core i9 processor, and a GeForce RTX 4070 Laptop GPU. Beyond boastworthy power, it catches the eye and stands out with its integrated carry strap for portability, reinforced corners and aluminum chassis for protection, and various slick setup arrangements for use on a table, while carrying, or virtually any other situation. It's an expensive way to engage with your games, but the price affords some remarkable versatility.

$2,500 | *rog.asus.com*

3
CORNERSTONES OF ADVENTURE
4
FLYER
5

Style meets
high-tech function

PS5
TT ISLE OF MAN RIDE ON THE EDGE 3
ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PS4 NINTENDO SWITCH XBOX
THE KNIGHT WITCH DELUXE EDITION
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THE LORD OF THE RINGS GOLLUM
ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PS5 PS4
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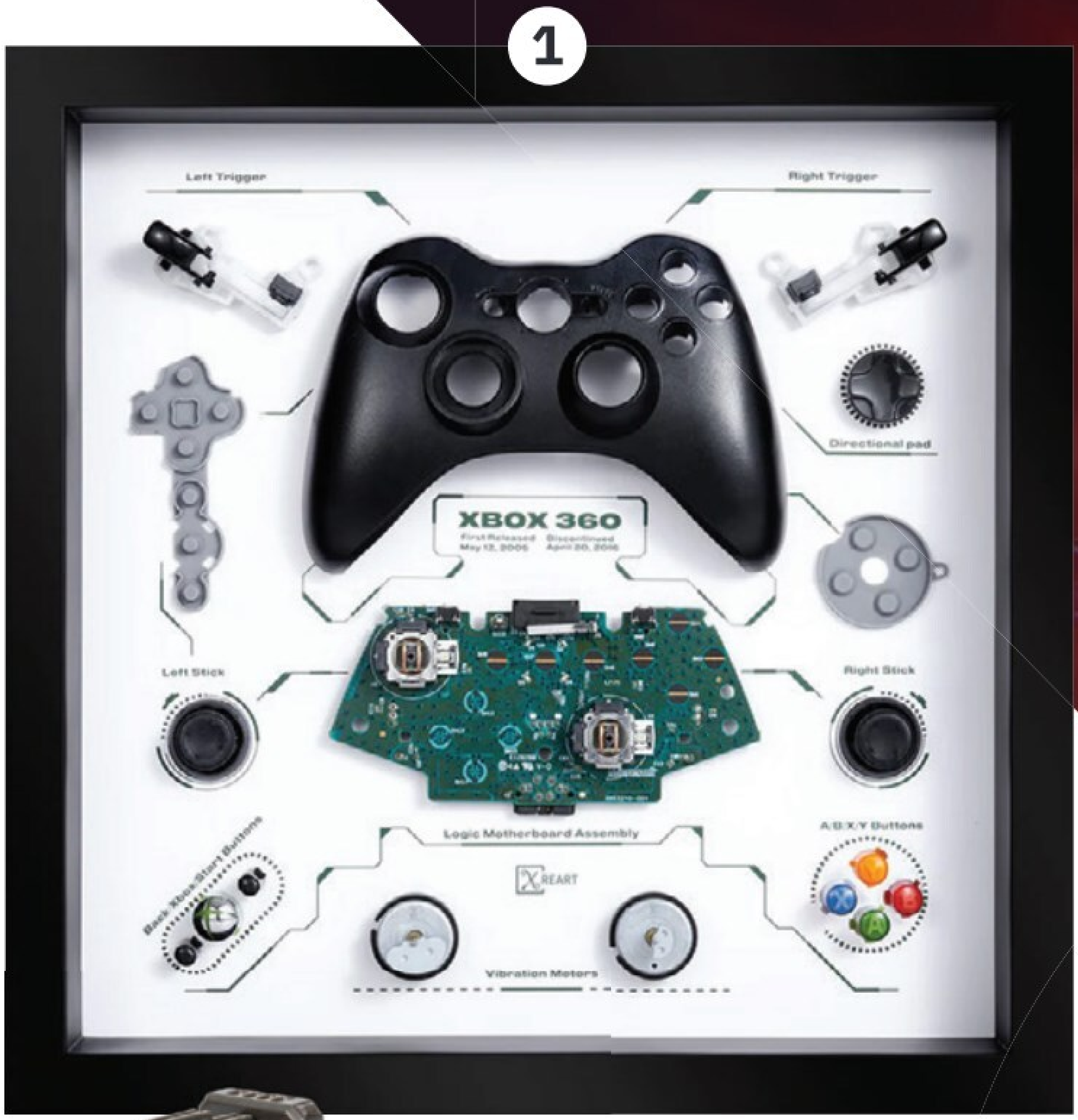
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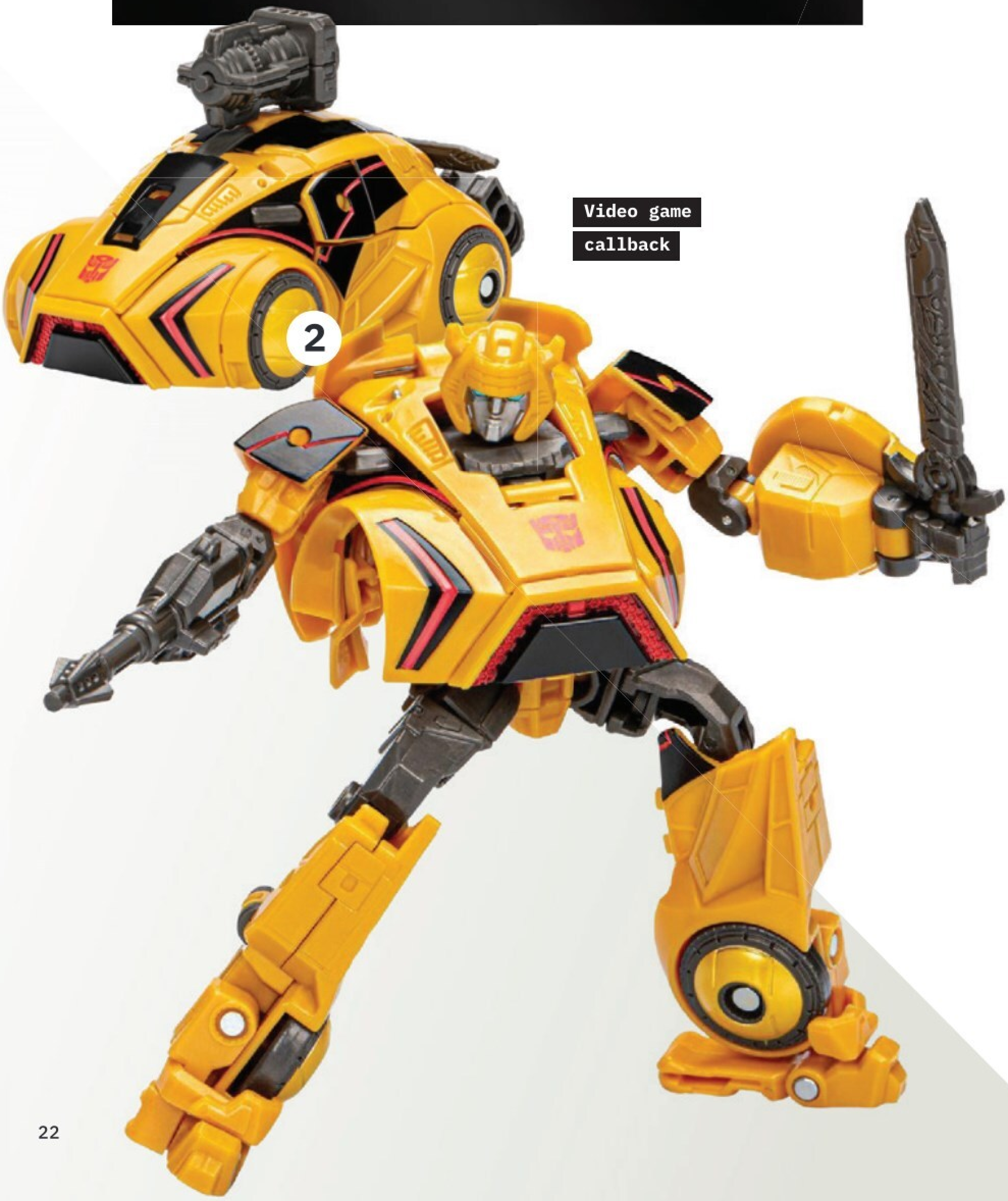
Left Trigger
Right Trigger
Directional pad
XBOX 360
Left Stick
Right Stick
Logic Motherboard Assembly
A/B/X/Y Buttons
Back/Xbox/Start Buttons
XREART
Vibration Motors



`Video game callback`

❶ XREART FRAMED XBOX 360 CONTROLLER

For the nostalgic types, Xreart's beautiful electronic dissections transform once functional controllers into memorable and hangable art. The shadow box-style inset holds the components that once helped you navigate through Halo 3 or BioShock, now labeled and laid out in simple shapes and framing. If the 360 was never your thing, other options celebrate the likes of the Game Boy, PSP, and Switch.

$179 | *xreart.com*

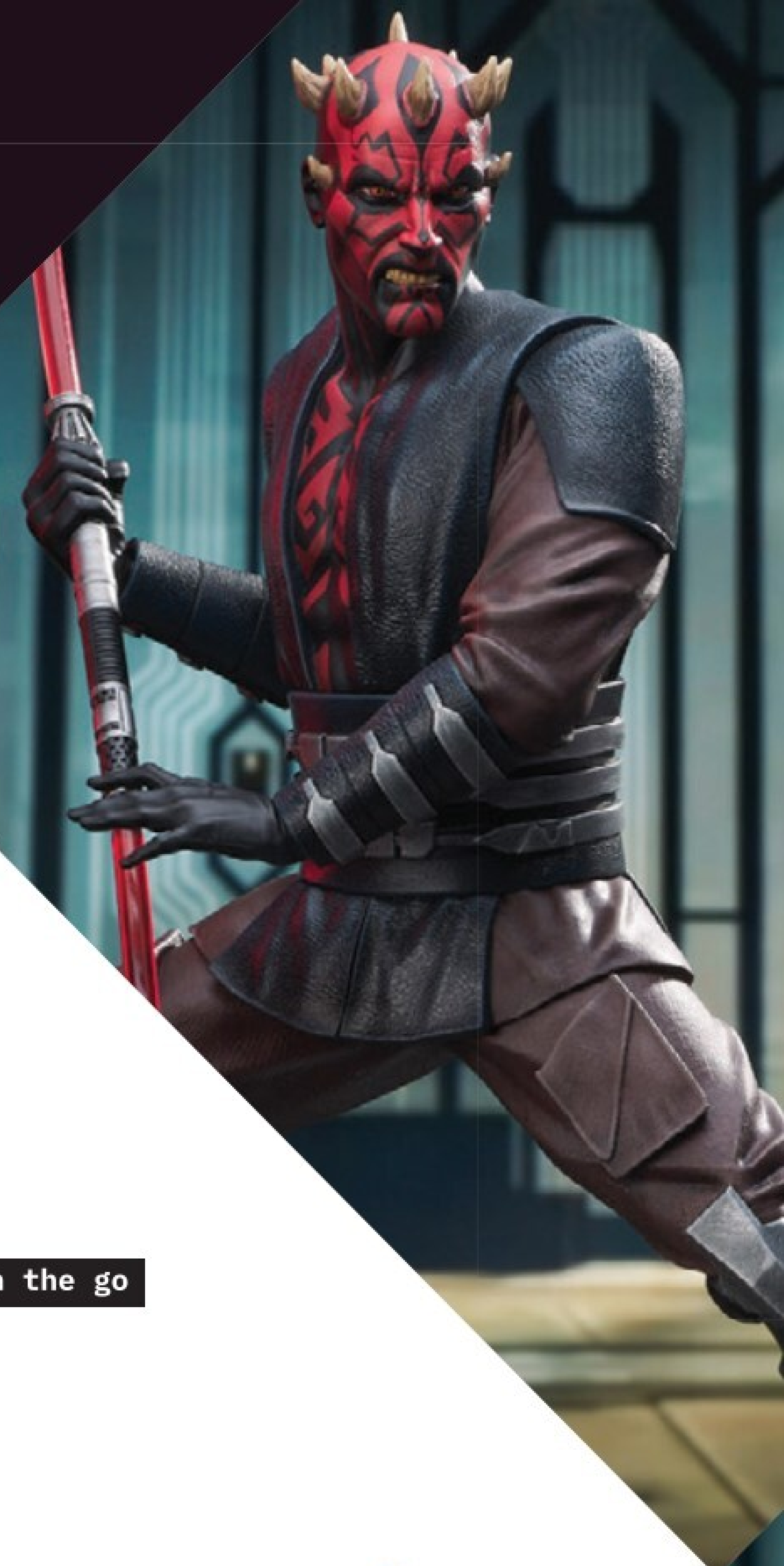
❷ TRANSFORMERS STUDIO SERIES GAMER EDITION BUMBLEBEE

The Studio Series Transformers line targets collectors, offering levels of detail, transformation complexity, and authenticity to the source imagery that is often not present in other Hasbro figures. This version of the Autobot scout is a welcome addition for fans who recall Activision's 2010 War For Cybertron. With a chunky robot design that converts into a slick domed Cybertronian vehicle, it's an awesome take on one of the most distinctive versions of the character.

$25 | *hasbropulse.com* | *gamestop.com*

4
GaNPrime
ANKER

Power on the go



❸ SCARLET WITCH GALLERY DIORAMA

Suppose you're hoping to help your new graduate celebrate a love of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but you're not aiming to break the bank. In that case, Diamond Select's diorama series is an excellent place to look. Even cast in PVC, the detail and character likenesses are very good, with action poses recalling key moments from the films and TV shows. This take on Wanda Maximoff captures the chaos-wielder as she appeared at the height of her power during Wandavision and stands at 10 inches as she magically descends onto your shelf.

$60 | *diamondselecttoys.com*

❹ ANKER 733 POWER BANK

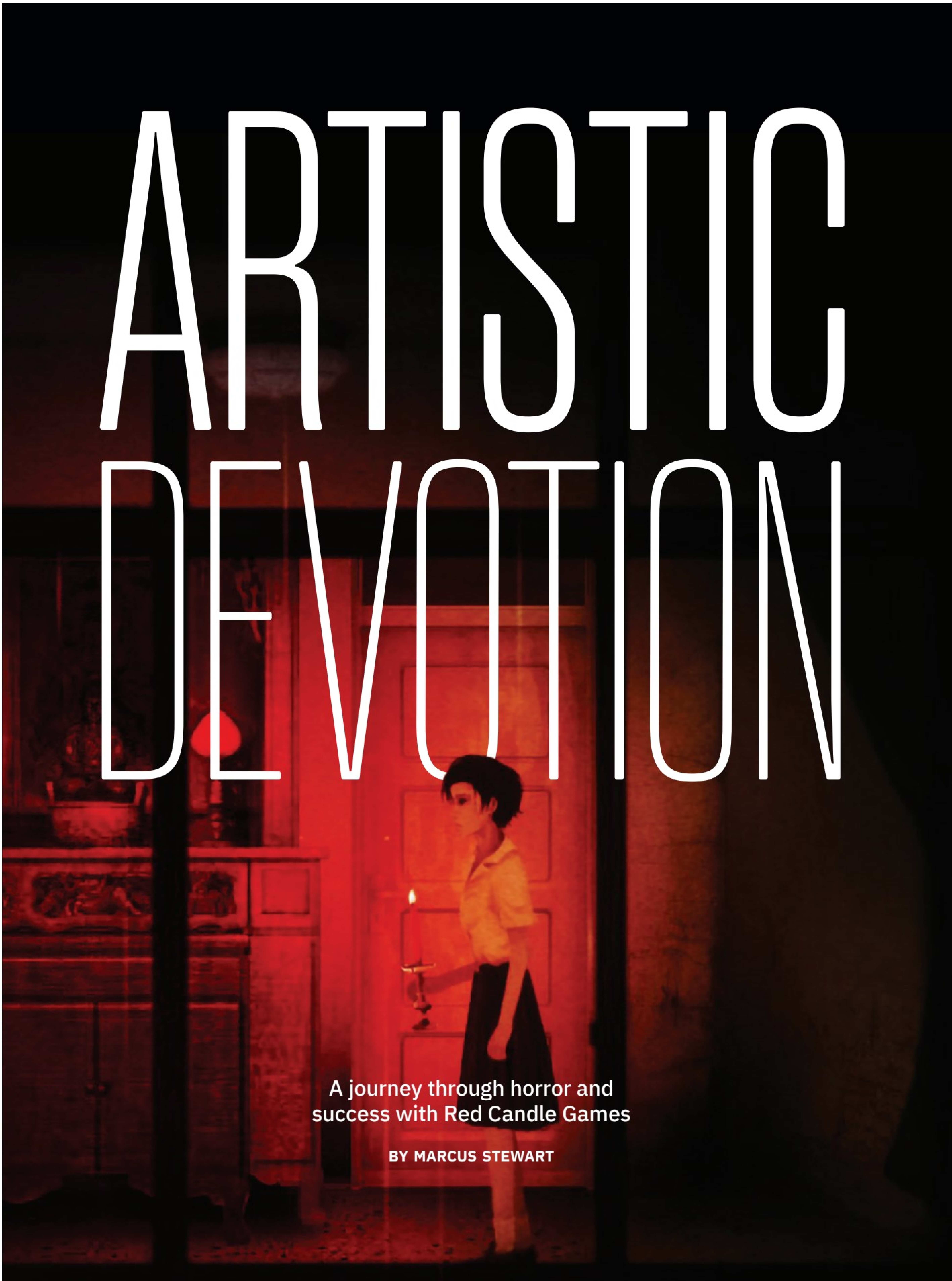
For the graduating senior looking to charge an array of devices on the go, this 65W fast-charging portable station simultaneously supports up to three separate connections – two USB-C and one USB-A. It's at its best and fastest while plugged in as a wall charger, but still does solid work keeping your phone, laptop, or other handheld going while out and about. If you're looking for some added fun, an alternate version licenses the Transformers franchise and features Optimus Prime theming across the device, so you can roll out in style.

$99 | *anker.com*

❺ STAR WARS AHSOKA AND DARTH MAUL MILESTONES STATUES

Either one of these separate high-end statues are knockouts, featuring meticulous sculpts for each of the 1/6 scale battle-posed warriors. But spring for both of them, and you get to immortalize one of the very best episodes of *The Clone Wars*, and the fierce duel that unfolded between thetwo Force users. Gentle Giant always manages to nail character likenesses; these two pieces represent a fascinating twist, transforming the animated visuals of the show to a more realistic take, but without losing what makes each character's poses so identifiable. ■

$250 (apiece) | *gentlegiantltd.com*



ARTISTIC DEVOTION

A journey through horror and success with Red Candle Games

BY MARCUS STEWART

Devotion

SCARING PLAYERS HAS HELPED put the small team at Red Candle Games on the map. Its first two titles, Detention and Devotion, impressed and terrified fans with frighteningly strong horror chops, but the team is leaving that behind to tackle something completely different in Nine Sols. This side-scrolling action platformer blends sci-fi with Chinese mythology and is Red Candle's most ambitious project yet. This significant step forward affords an opportunity to look back on the studio's young history, so we spoke with co-founder Vincent Yang to learn about how a small band of gamers in Taiwan formed one of the industry's most promising – and, at one time, controversial – indie studios.

Red Candle Games began in 2014 when designer Coffee Yao was developing a prototype for Detention. The side-scrolling horror game features two students exploring a haunted high school in 1960s Taiwan, incorporating local cultural references rarely seen in games. These elements drew the attention of Henry and Light Wang during an indie developer meetup in Taipei. According to Yang, Detention impressed the Wangs enough for them to join the project. As the game grew in scope, the three recruited help from mutual friends – Doy Chiang, Hans Chen, and Yang himself – bumping the yet-to-be-named team to six members by late 2015. After working remotely on Detention for a period, the group decided a physical office was necessary, which led to the official formation of Red Candle Games.

Detention was released on Steam in January 2017 and was well-received by critics and players. The game has since been ported to multiple platforms and even adapted into a live-action film in 2019 (it premiered in the U.S. in 2021). Additionally, Netflix and Taiwan's Public Television Service released a Detention TV show in 2020 – though with a different story from the movie.

Red Candle Games' founders, (left to right): Doy Chiang, Hans Chen, Coffee Yao, Vincent Yang, Henry Wang, and Light Wang
↓

Red Candle followed this success with Devotion, an atmospheric first-person horror game set within a haunted apartment. Moving from 2D to 3D development is a big design shift, but Yang believes regularly changing gears like this is necessary to maintain fan interest.

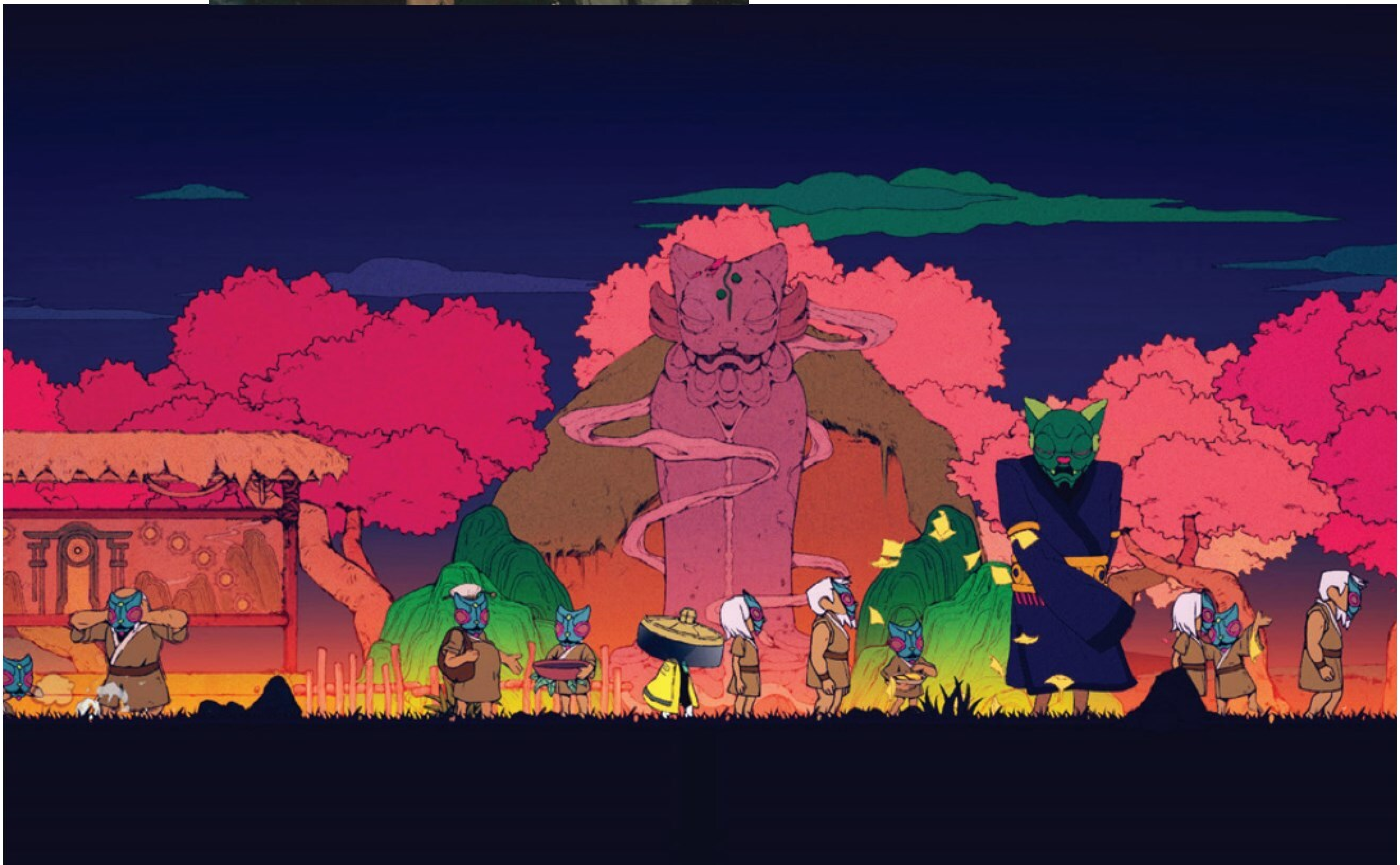
"Because in this ever-changing and competitive gaming market, we often find it difficult to impress the players by applying the same techniques repeatedly, which pushes us to keep delivering new and innovative ideas," Yang says. "This, in turn, changes the way we make games."

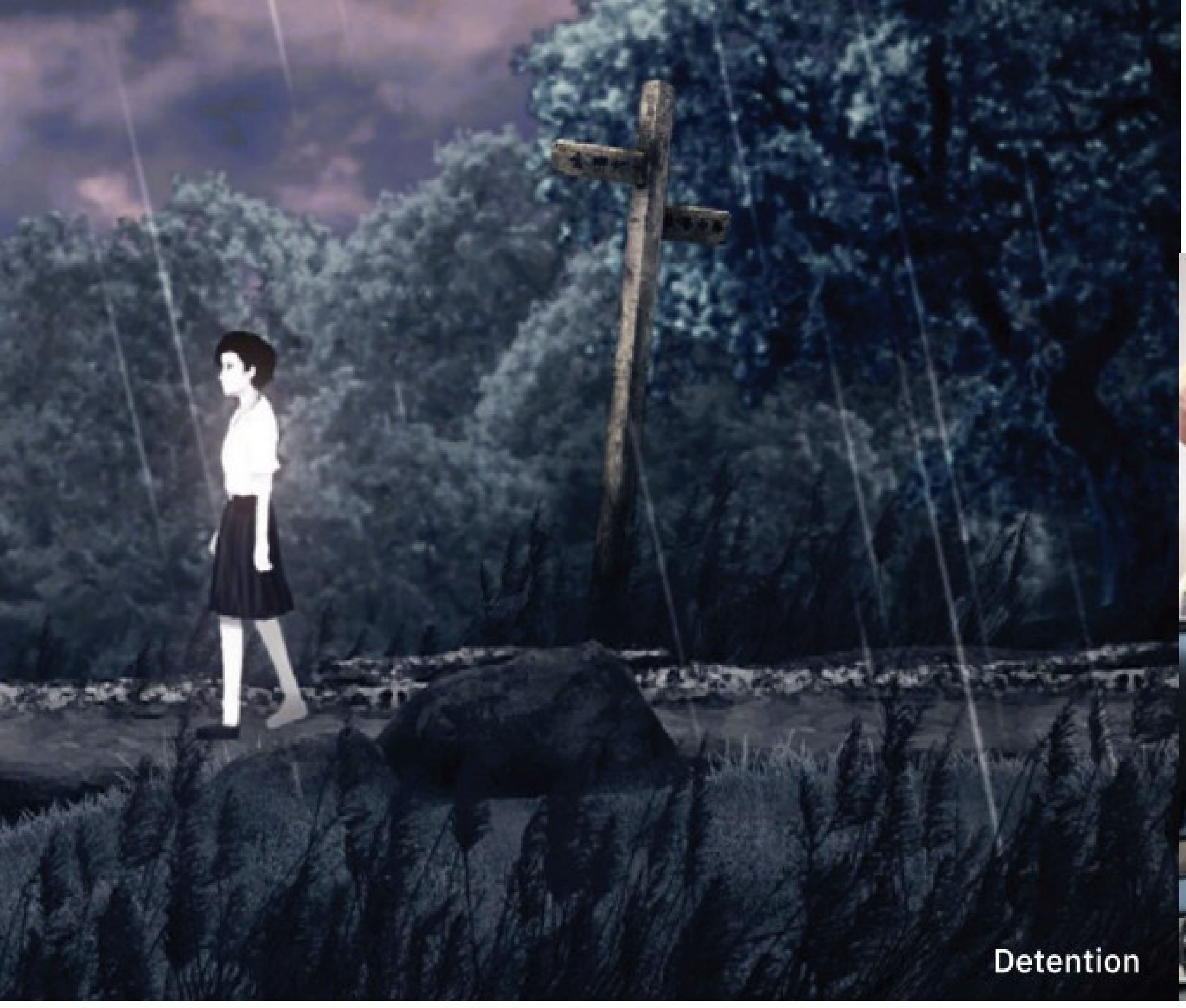
After over two years of work, Devotion arrived on Steam in February 2019 to heaps of praise from the lucky players who managed to get their hands on it. But only two days after its launch, the game riled up controversy among Chinese players thanks to a piece of in-game art mocking China's president, Xi Jinping, by calling him Winnie the Pooh, referencing an internet meme that unfavorably compares the leader's appearance to the character. China and Taiwan have a tense relationship, so the resulting backlash from the country's players and the government was severe enough to force Red Candle to pull Devotion from sale. The game's Chinese publisher even lost its business license.

To the dismay of horror enthusiasts, Devotion remained delisted for over two years. Inklings of hope would occasionally arise, such as PC storefront GOG announcing plans to re-sell the game before it immediately back-peddled due to vaguely defined player complaints. Fortunately, Red Candle finally began re-selling Devotion directly through its website in March 2021, bringing its tumultuous journey to an end. Red Candle could move forward. "As a team, we felt relieved, as if a heavy weight was lifted from our shoulders," says Yang.

Moving forward meant stepping away from horror to do something different. Enter Nine Sols, which

Red Candle Games' upcoming Nine Sols pays homage to the Chinese myth of Hou Yi, and features a manga-inspired art style
↓





Detention

Red Candle started working on a few months before Devotion's original launch. Yang says the game originates from a concept he envisioned years prior based on the story of Hou Yi. In Chinese mythology, Hou Yi is a legendary archer who used his bow to rescue the country from plagues and saved the moon during an eclipse, among other supernatural feats. Yang proposed reworking this story into a science fiction tale, an idea that intrigued his teammates.

Nine Sols unfolds in the realm of New Kunlun, a sanctuary for humans created by nine god-like rulers. However, the population is unaware of New Kunlun's sinister true purpose. That changes when a child awakens Yi, a cat-like hero that history has forgotten. Yi embarks on a quest to slay the nine rulers and free New Kunlun. The adventure sports a manga-inspired hand-drawn art direction blending cyberpunk/sci-fi with Chinese fantasy and Taoism. Gameplaywise, Nine Sols is a fast-paced 2D Metroidvania with Souls-like combat, as players hack apart enemies using Yi's sword and parry attacks in a manner directly influenced by Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice.

The project is a gamble, as the team leaves its comfort zone to make its first action platformer. Yang says with its art assets, gameplay mechanics, levels, animations, and 12-15 hour length, Nine Sols is the studio's biggest title yet. But the team needed to do something different to avoid feeling burned out on horror while also taking advantage of the flexibility its team size affords.

"Being an indie developer, in a way, makes us more versatile and gives us more room to be creative, meaning we have the privilege to experiment on different topics and gameplay," Yang says. "It's then reasonable that we want to leverage that versatility and explore other possibilities wherever we have the chance."

Nine Sols is Red Candle's first action game, but it's leveraging its narrative chops to craft what Yang hopes will be a compelling story filled with rich lore to create what he describes as "a new kind of action platformer" – one with equal emphasis on engaging gameplay and storytelling.

Nine Sols also marks the team's most serious attempt at penetrating the Western market. Detention and Devotion, despite their success, still appeal to relatively niche audiences. On the other hand, Nine Sols combines two very popular subgenres, and Yang hopes that results in the game making the biggest splash possible overseas and putting the studio on more people's radars.

As of publishing, Nine Sols is slated for this fall, but curious players can play a free Steam demo. Depending on its success, the title could be a launch pad for other experiences that don't focus exclusively on frightening players.

"If given the opportunity, I think we'd love to explore other genres in the future," says Yang. "Deep down, we are simply a group of game creators who love all kinds of games. So as long as we ensure the product we produce will have guaranteed quality and doesn't disappoint our current and future supporters, I find no reasons for us to be locked into the horror genre."

As for Red Candle's future, Yang believes maintaining its small size has its benefit. Since Devotion's launch, only three new employees have joined, while one has left, meaning the studio has grown from 11 to 13 full-time staff members. While he's happy with the advantages of running a small team – smoother communication and more room to experiment – he's not opposed to expanding the studio's size if needed. "I envision us as a resilient team that can embrace and adapts to any possible changes regardless of our size," Yang says.

Nine Sols is the biggest test yet for the studio, eschewing almost everything that brought it success in an attempt to broaden its appeal by tackling a competitive genre. But Red Candle Games has proven its ability, resiliency, and versatility over its relatively young existence. We're excited to see how it continues to delight – or terrify – its fans going forward. ■

OPINION

Catching Up With Old Friends

The journey to continue the favorite stories of my youth, 25 years later

BY BRIAN SHEA

"LISTEN TO MY STORY. THIS MAY BE OUR LAST CHANCE." With those immortal words uttered by Tidus in the opening moments of 2001's Final Fantasy X, my life changed forever. But it wasn't just Tidus' story that grabbed me. It was everything surrounding it – the cast of characters, the world, the conflicts, the power dynamics, the politics, and the relationships. All these elements gelled to create a potent recipe for an adventure I'll vividly remember for the rest of my life.

***Spoiler Warning:** The following article contains spoilers to Final Fantasy X, Final Fantasy X-2, and Pokémon Gold & Silver*

In the subsequent years, I've immersed myself in the world of Spira, learning everything I could about the world I fought so valiantly to save from the endless cycle of death perpetuated by Sin, Seymour, and Yevon. I watched YouTube lore videos, read Wikis, and replayed the game endlessly. In fact, I did everything imaginable save for one thing: play the direct sequel.

Despite my fixation on learning and experiencing everything Final Fantasy X had to offer, I never played 2003's Final Fantasy X-2. Maybe it was the change in the battle system or the word of mouth that it wasn't as good as X, but it wasn't just Final Fantasy X-2 that I skipped. In fact, a few of my favorite games of all time did get direct sequels. And the key similarity binding them all together is that it took me years to finally continue these stories.

Another example is The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask. I've replayed Ocarina of Time almost as many times as Final Fantasy X, yet I hadn't played more than a few hours of its sequel. When I was young, I never owned the Nintendo 64 Expansion Pak required for Majora's Mask. But I always yearned for another adventure with the Link from Ocarina of Time, and one had been waiting for me all along.

Then something happened. I finally played Pokémon SoulSilver, a 2010 remake of the direct follow-up to another favorite game of mine: 1998's Pokémon Red and Blue. In addition to continuing the fight against Team Rocket, the story ends by allowing the player to return to Kanto, the region of Red and Blue, and interact with several familiar characters. In addition to these exciting reunions and battles, I loved witnessing the passage of time within a region I was already so familiar with. Years later, with The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom poised to continue the story of my favorite game, Breath of the Wild, I decided it was finally time to revisit and continue the stories of Final Fantasy X and Ocarina of Time.

I began this by tackling Majora's Mask; I figured giving myself a game between it and Tears of the Kingdom might be a good idea. I'm glad I did, not because I needed some kind of Zelda buffer, but because Majora's Mask, while distinct, haunting, and compelling, doesn't deliver the kind of continuation I was looking for. Yes, it's the Link I remember from Ocarina of Time, but because it takes place in Termina instead of Hyrule, the events felt utterly removed from the story I loved.

I knew this going in, but I was hopeful I'd still receive some interesting lore drops outside of the main story. Those moments were few and far between, but I received an exciting experiment in how the Zelda formula could be expanded outside of what's commonly expected of the series. Seeing all those characters I remember from Ocarina of Time, but as different people altogether, gives the game a dreamlike aura. And the new transformative gameplay mechanics and time-loop structure hammer home that Termina is much more than meets the eye. Majora's Mask didn't end up being my favorite Zelda game, nor did it deliver much in the way of expanding my understanding of Link or the Ocarina of Time Hyrule, but it scratched an itch other Zelda games do not.

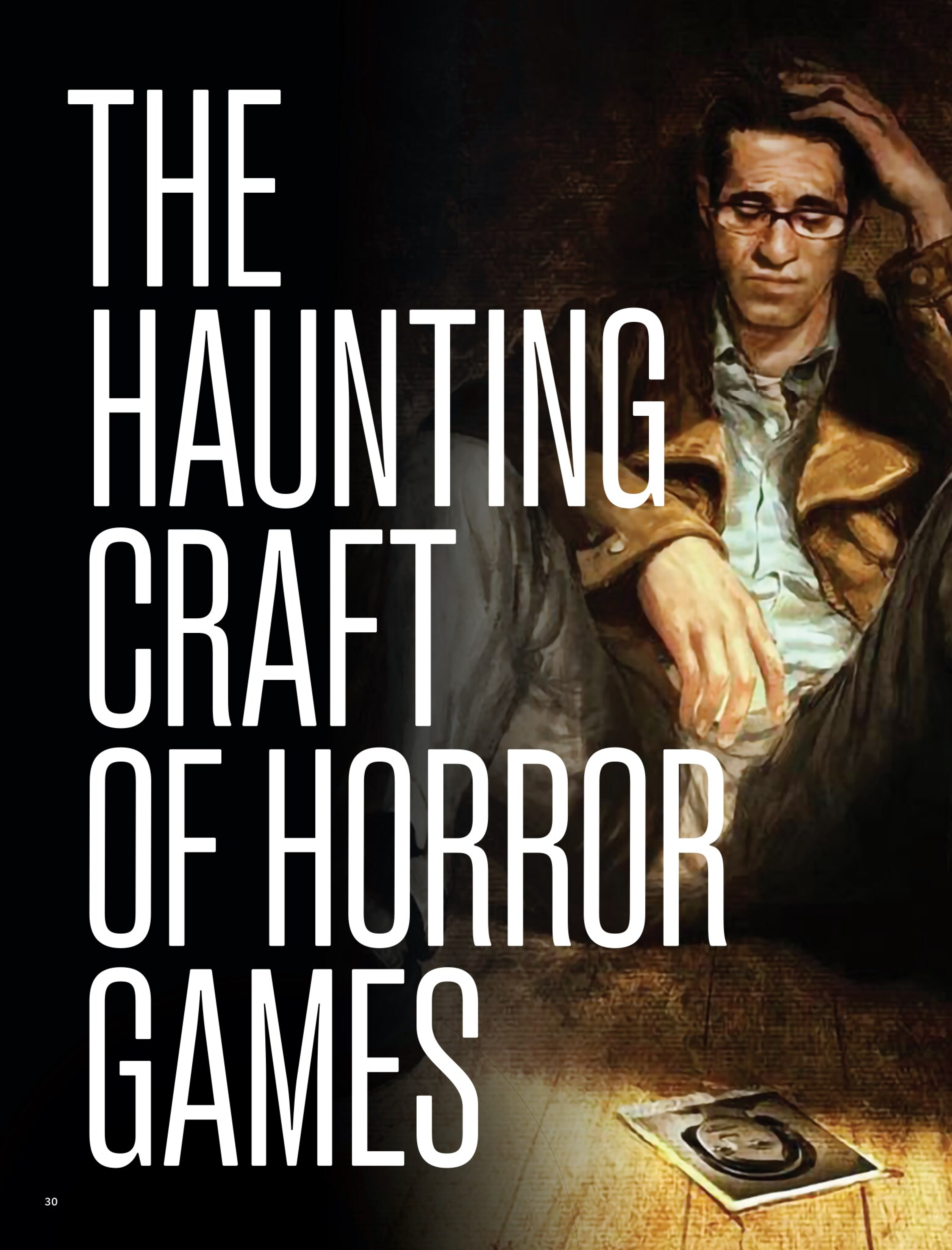
Conversely, Final Fantasy X-2 provided the exact type of continuation I was looking for. Taking place years after the end of Final Fantasy X, you explore a Spira searching for an identity removed from the grips of Sin and a fanatical, oppressive religion. These themes of an entire people struggling with their identity while simultaneously reconciling that they don't have much grasp on their own history gave me everything I wanted. Whether it's Zanarkand transformed into a tourist attraction (which would absolutely happen) or the brewing war between the Ronso and Guado, seeing the consequences of everything that happened in Final Fantasy X play out was satisfying and enthralling.

I loved once again encountering the various characters Yuna had met on her pilgrimage in Final Fantasy X and watching as she grew beyond her role as a summoner. Seeing her struggle with a desire to be selfish for the first time in her life, even as Spira calls upon her once again, is the kind of continuation I was hoping to find. Final Fantasy X and Final Fantasy X-2 are games about coping with loss but in very different ways. Yuna experiences outward conflicts throughout both games, but as highlighted in X-2, her internal conflict is perhaps the most compelling narrative thread in either game. The games rhyme thematically, even though they tell very different stories, which makes them work. In fact, when X-2 revealed that another world-ending threat had emerged, I instantly longed for a time when we were catching up with what was going on in Spira and further exploring Yuna's place in it.

Hollywood has caught on to the fact that people want to continue the stories of their younger days and has cashed in considerably on the nostalgia factor. Movies like *Top Gun: Maverick*, *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens*, and *Creed* have all shown that carrying forward in the universe of favorite films from the past, all while delivering a mix of heavy-handed nostalgia and giving the audience reason to be excited for the future thanks to a charming cast of new characters, can be a winning formula. But that's not what these games were, even if I experienced them in that way. Still, I'm a sucker for a continuation of a story, and I'm upset that I waited so long to discover the journey through Majora's Mask and Final Fantasy X-2.

But that's what made them special for me; by now, I know Ocarina of Time and Final Fantasy X so well that having more to experience as an adult in his mid-30s feels like a sentimental return to a special part of my youth. Even if I didn't like Final Fantasy X-2 and The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask as much as their predecessors, I'm so glad I finally took the time to deepen my connection with those worlds and characters. Now, when I return to the worlds of Spira of Final Fantasy X and the Hyrule of Ocarina of Time, I'll do so with a deeper understanding and greater appreciation for those inaugural adventures. And with Tears of the Kingdom finally here, I'm excitedly diving back into that world and story that I adore so much – this time, without waiting. ■

For more on Brian's time with Majora's Mask, check out episode 71 of Game Informer's All Things Nintendo podcast



THE HAUNTING CRAFT OF HORROR GAMES

Concept art for Silent Hill: Shattered Memories (2009)

We spoke to horror game developers about what they're afraid of

BY DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO

DURING HIS CHILDHOOD, Sam Barlow experienced a traumatic event: Being chased by monkeys around a swimming pool. He was around age 5, living in Tanzania in East Africa. His parents did nothing, he says. They just laughed.

Decades later, he found himself trying to recreate the experience in Silent Hill: Shattered Memories.

Nowadays, Barlow is known for making Her Story and founding the studio Half Mermaid, developer of Telling Lies and Immortality. In 2009, however, he was working at Climax Studios on Silent Hill and became obsessed with making characters slightly hairy and having them run on all fours. Simultaneously, he had the team's level designers build a segment where you'd run through a swimming pool.

But testing the level presented an issue. In Shattered Memories, you can look over the main character's shoulder during chase sequences to see how close enemies are from grabbing you. However, if the creatures ran on all fours, the camera would have difficulty showing them as they'd be lower toward the ground. "I was very specific about, 'If I ran around here, this is how the enemy should behave,'" Barlow says. "I was like, 'Why am I so obsessed with it?'" Then it dawned on him: he was recreating his memory.

Working on horror games often leads to stories like this. Developers spend their days exposed to the ways they intend to scare their audience. Examining the right moment to insert a jumpscare, looking at real-life imagery to design otherworldly creatures, and using personal experiences as influence is all part of the 9 to 5 routine.

Game Informer spoke to some of the creators behind Resident Evil, Silent Hill, Fatal Frame, Darkest Dungeon, and the Dead Space remake about the research and concepts behind horror games – from the influence of personal experiences to what scares the people who craft these frightening worlds.

The Evil Within

HAUNTING MATERIAL

There are multiple sources of inspiration when it comes to horror. Breaking down existing tropes to expose unexplored novelties inevitably forces developers to face horror head-on. This research leads to external material and discussions about themes you wouldn't expect to learn about in an office.

For Shinji Mikami, Tango Gameworks' founder and one of the creative minds behind Resident Evil and The Evil Within, it all starts with a theme. "I think that the scariest thing for us as humans is actually other humans," Mikami says. "But we don't want to put [regular] humans as enemy characters. That's where a lot of thought and creativity is needed."

The concept of zombies was straightforward enough for the first Resident Evil, as different media had experimented with it already and served as jumping points. But during the development of The Evil Within, for example, the main keywords were "pain and torture." The prevalence of barbed wire, chains, and spikes surrounding enemies and environments serve as callbacks to that foundation.

Real-life locations are also good sources of inspiration. Mikami has always liked the design and architecture of Spain, a sentiment going back to Resident Evil 4. And while, initially, he wanted to set the game in Germany, he thought that having enemies speak the language frequently "made us in Japan feel that all enemies would sound very angry," so the team opted for Spain instead.

While the team could do most of its research remotely, Mikami sent part of the staff on a five-day trip to gather footage for textures and other references, taking pictures and understanding the feel of the place. "It was hard to get approvals for that trip because people thought [they] were going there to have fun, but it was actually work to gather materials," he says, laughing.

Immortality

More often than not, Barlow does research in his spare time. The usage of technology to consume media – and its limitations – is something he's always been fond of. He spent his formative years watching old films on video cassettes and staying up past his bedtime to see if there was anything weird on TV. Back then, you'd have to purchase a special newspaper listing what was on the television, so there was a genuine unknown nature to tuning into those random channels using dial knobs, unaware of what could appear onscreen.

For Immortality, especially with how everyone has been used to the immediacy of YouTube and Netflix for ages, Barlow knew there was an inherent expectation for how people consume media today. That's why rewinding became a central piece in its horror elements. "Giving people the sense that the game itself was slightly aggressive and kind of haunted, it seemed like such a fun thing," he says, recalling the impact that films like David Lynch's *Inland Empire* had on him.

Makoto Shibata, director and co-creator of the Fatal Frame series, coexists with his hauntings. In its conception, he set out to make the scariest horror games available. This task sounds possible when considering Shibata says he has a lifetime of experiences with ghosts, which he has featured in the series in varying degrees.

Ever since he was a kid, overhearing what he describes as a ghost parade that seemingly travelled between two shrines close to his home, he's always seen the world through a supernatural lens. "Being able to provide players with an unusual experience, showing this world that only I can see, is something I find interesting," Shibata says.

During an hour-long chat alongside producer Yutaka Fukaya, Shibata often responds to my questions and excitedly retells stories I came across while reading past interviews. His hand was grabbed by a ghost who asked to "go swimming together," mimicking the pose of an unknown guest he found in a hotel where only he and his relatives were staying, and a recurrent "Slender Man-like" appearance in his dreams called Mr. Miyamoto all come up in our chat.

Since I knew about Mr. Miyamoto beforehand, I ask Shibata if this presence continues to visit his dreams. "Sometimes, sometimes," he answers with a serious tone. "Once I put [him] in a game for a while, it doesn't show up, so it's kind of like he's satisfied after being put in the game. But he does appear sometimes still."

Chris Bourassa, co-founder and creative director at Red Hook Studios, has lived and breathed the gloominess and existential dread surrounding Darkest Dungeon's themes since 2013. Once again, the sequel poises the characters against impossible odds, but the premise starts with a looming doomsday.

You witness the few remaining bastions of humanity from inside your caravan, rummaging through infested biomes and towns set ablaze, and the horrific ways they react to this despair. "It's the response to the end of the world," Bourassa says. This message resonated unexpectedly closer to home once the COVID-19 pandemic began a year after Red Hook announced Darkest Dungeon II.

Remote work, on the other hand, never ceases to shake the everyday routine. "My wife was pregnant at the time," animation director Yousuf Mapara says while explaining the process behind Darkest Dungeon's The Harvest Child, a nightmarish cornucopia baby monster. More often than not, he'd be too focused on adding physics onto dripping flesh to notice his 7-year-old daughter looking at the computer screen with shock before quickly covering the screen with his hands.

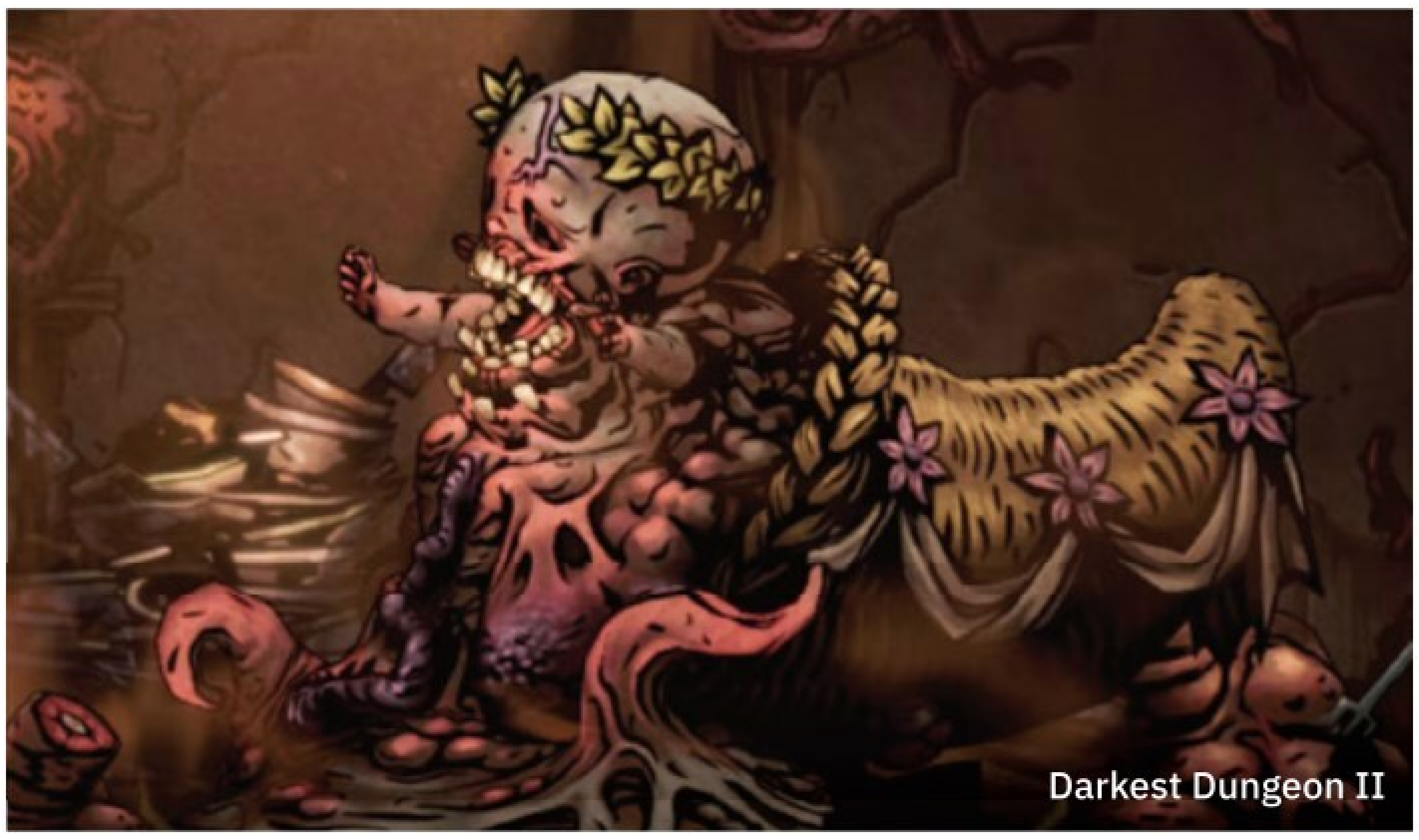
Fatal Frame: Project Zero

CLIVE BARKER'S PITCH

After working on Silent Hill, an unnamed company invited Barlow's Climax Studios team to pitch for a Clive Barker game. The company that held the IP wanted it to do the *Books of Blood*, a six-story anthology series, making an episode for each book in a Silent Hill style.

Barlow immediately knew this wouldn't work. The company didn't realize how expensive it was to make a Silent Hill game, nor were the *Books of Blood* as adaptable as it thought. But he suggested a pitch back, in which they'd pretend that Barker had tried to make a video game that was never finished because something awful happened to the development team.

"The idea is that you were discovering the bitter version of this lost game in the modern day, unravelling the bugs, the hidden secrets, and the darker stuff, and then realizing that the game itself was possessed. They decided that was too interesting," Barlow laughs.



Darkest Dungeon II

Speaking of routines, Barlow went through a fast-paced period of creating character and enemy concepts with Silent Hill: Origins. The project was first started by a division of Climax Group in Los Angeles and then passed over to the United Kingdom team after the branch closed mid-development, which had different ideas to make it feel more authentic to the series.

They couldn't budget either time or money to have artists help, so Barlow would go home and prepare designs in the evenings and bring them to the team the next day. The need to move fast led to a smoother process, as there was no room to submit multiple stages of each character to a publisher and go through feedback.

Barlow used this in his artistic process – such as with the boss Momma in the game's asylum, representing the memory of the protagonist's mother. “She was kind of suspended from the ceiling, almost as if wrapped in plastic, which I believe was about this idea of being institutionalized and the loss of humanity of using those clothes,” he tells me. “A lot of the reference images we had [were] from [...] weird contraptions of people being bound and wrapped in plastic. Bizarrely, my logic was, ‘It's fine for me to download this stuff at home, but I shouldn't bring any of this to the office.’”

FEAR FACTOR

Almost all of the developers I spoke to for this piece talked about their love for horror. Yet, every person in a studio can't share this feeling. A recurring question I asked is whether they've worked with someone unaccustomed to the genre and if there were any specific considerations for them.

“They do it as work, professionally, so they would have to get used to it” Mikami says after a short laugh. “There really is no real special care that is applied for making people get used to it because it'd be part of their work.”

Masato Kimura, a producer at Tango Gameworks, says he initially wasn't fond of horror when he started his career in game development at Capcom, working with Mikami on the Resident Evil series. But as the research process involved watching plenty of horror movies, he got used to it over time. “It's the same as fishermen getting used to motion sickness on boats,” Mikami adds.

Unlike Kimura, the people on Barlow's team did not expect to jump from working on SpongeBob SquarePants: SuperSponge to two Silent Hill projects. He remembers one animator who was creeped out, in particular, by the death animation in Shattered Memories, which had enemies gently stroking the protagonist's face as they were manifestations of her daughter.

“It was like, ‘I'll chop his head off, but the creatures doing this is really creeping me out,’” Barlow recalls. “This was still slightly in a time where everybody in video games worked really hard, and there was no real consideration for thinking about people's well-being [...] If I were to make a big-scale horror game with a room full of people, we would probably want to sit down and talk about that. At the time, you just kind of got on with it. It's a weird job.”

Resident Evil 4

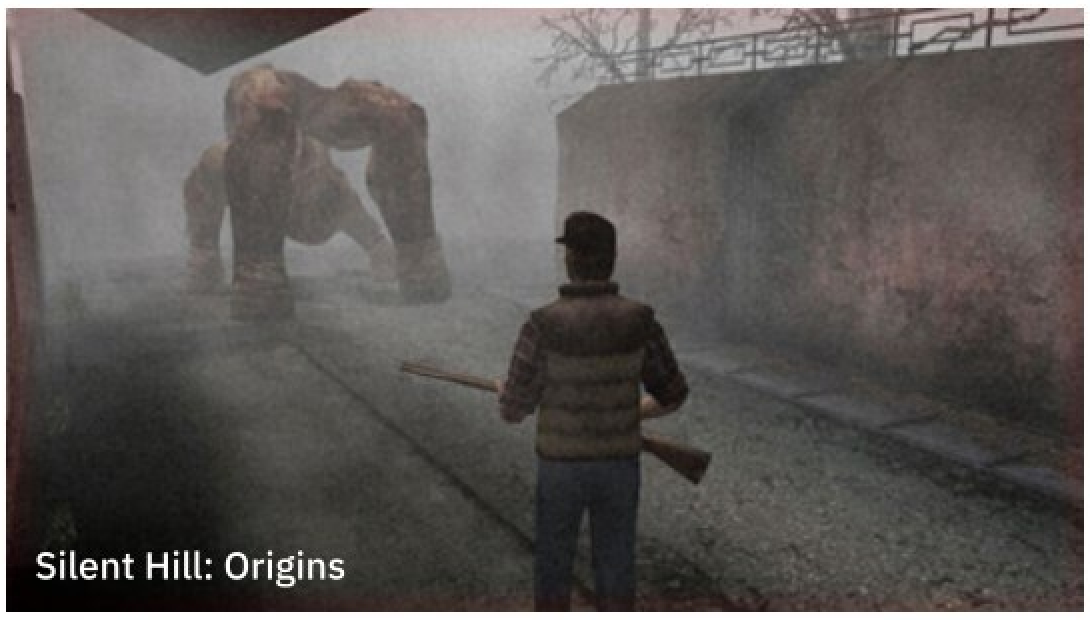
Dead Space Remake

The opposite can also happen as development progresses, with teams becoming numb to horror. “When you see things like a jumpscare once or twice it might scare you,” says Joel MacMillan, Realization Director at Motive Studio, which recently worked on the Dead Space remake. “But as developers working on the game, you see it a hundred times. You start to lose the sense of how effective it is.” In the case of Motive, it worked closely with EA's Community Council, an internal group of “veteran players, developers, and influencers” who provided feedback on the experience.

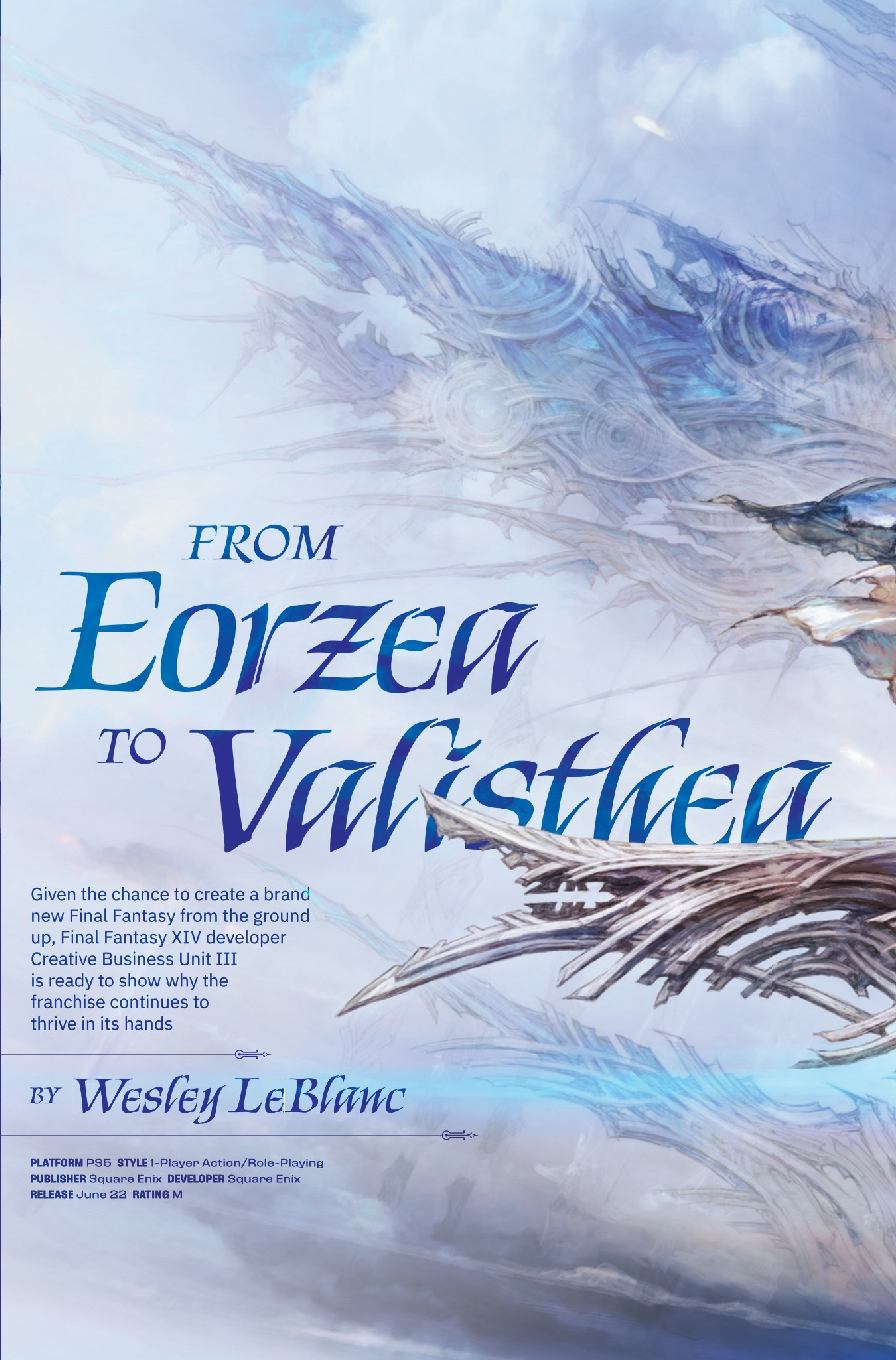
But as much resistance as these experiences create over time, everybody has their own fears. Films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Scarface* left strong images in Mikami’s mind around chainsaws. “Even without actually seeing them on screen, the sound instils a lot of fear,” he says. This might resonate if you’ve ever played Resident Evil 4 or The Evil Within, as both games have prominent chainsaw-wielding foes.

“A combination of losing my mind, rats, and then a little bit of fingernail torture porn; that would be my recipe for disaster,” Barlow says. “The things to my mind that were the most horrific across the games I worked on weren’t the traditional monsters; it was the sad things. The really scary thing is that we all die someday and that our memory is valuable.”

“Imagination is probably one of the scariest things you can have,” Shibata says about his fear of moments where nothing happens, and you don't know what comes next. I can relate to this feeling, as I had planned to ask him whether he could see any ghosts in my room. Not everybody believes in them, nor has had experiences like Shibata and I, so I wait until the interview is almost over to ask in a mix of embarrassment and nerves for what he could say. “In terms of your room, I don’t see or feel anything, so everything seems to be okay.” ■



Silent Hill: Origins



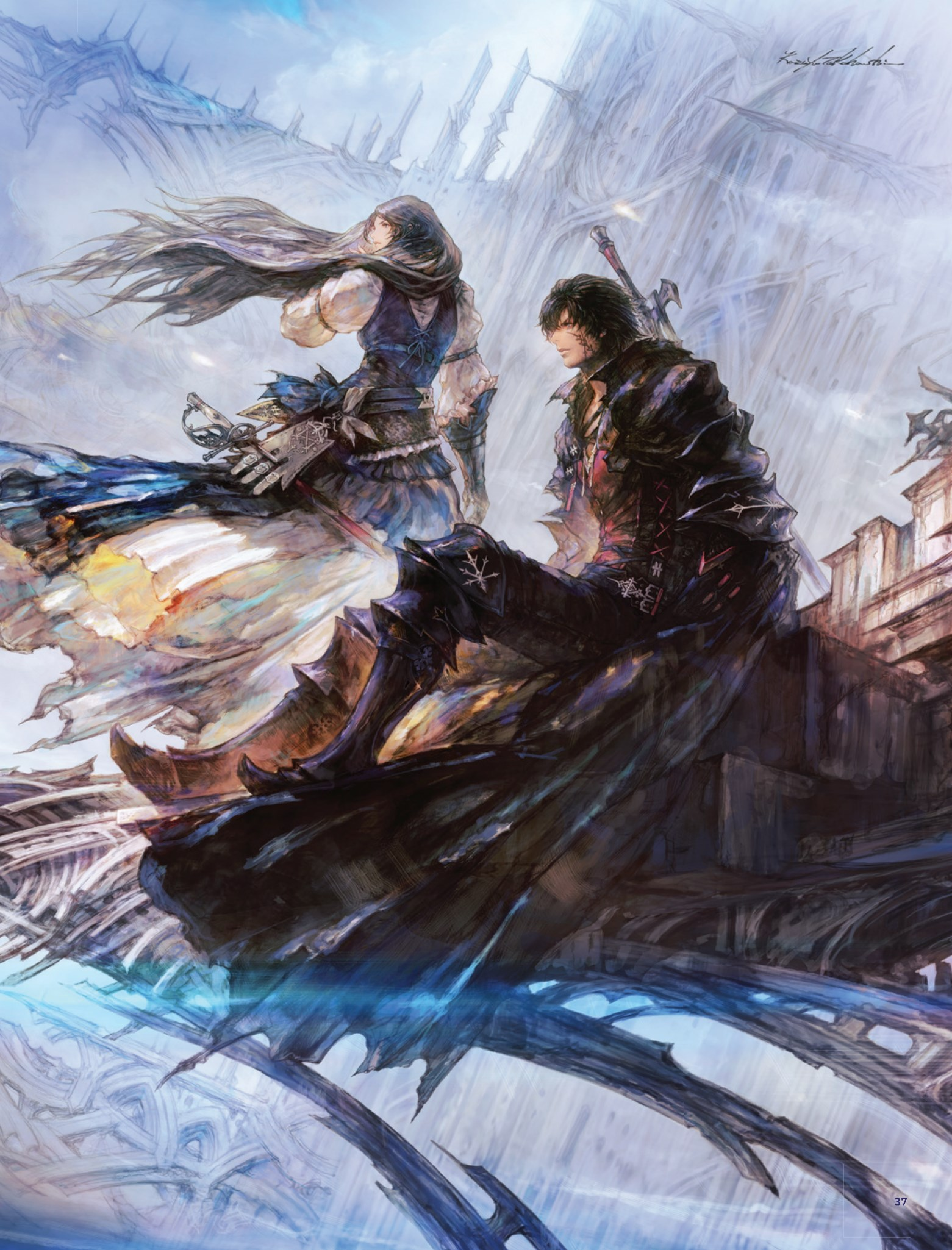
FINAL FANTASY XVI

FROM Eorzea TO Valisthea

Given the chance to create a brand new Final Fantasy from the ground up, Final Fantasy XIV developer Creative Business Unit III is ready to show why the franchise continues to thrive in its hands

BY Wesley LeBlanc

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix
RELEASE June 22 **RATING** M


Kazuya Takahashi

LIKE EVERY MAINLINE FINAL FANTASY BEFORE IT,

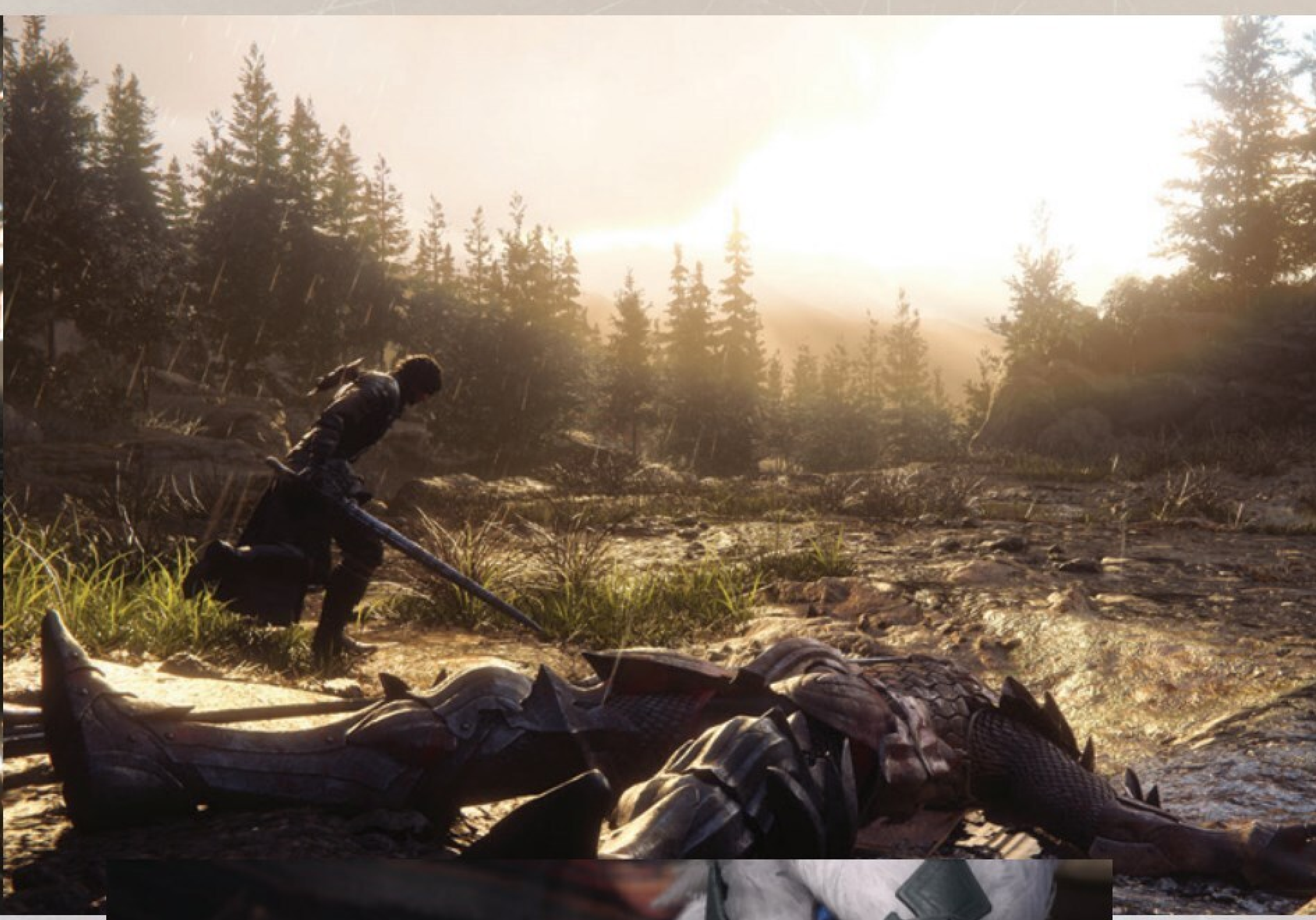
FFXVI is an important and exciting release for Square Enix. Not just because Final Fantasy games are the company's bread and butter but because the series has grown to become an event, a franchise that, love it or hate it, is hard to ignore. Regardless of where a specific entry lands, because each new numbered entry features its own lore, characters, combat system, and world, you'll likely watch what the next one is doing. It's a rare franchise where each new game demands attention.

That was certainly the case when Square Enix and Sony surprise-revealed FFXVI in 2020 as a PlayStation 5 exclusive, and it remains the case with each new trailer, media beat, and gameplay video. Walking around Akihabara, the neon electric arcade paradise in Tokyo's Chiyoda district while visiting the country to meet the FFXVI team and play the game, it was hard to go far without seeing it referenced. Posters, kiosks with PS5s playing previously released trailers, and preorder directives plaster the walls as I climb up eight-floor video game stores. The excitement is palpable.

Like Final Fantasy XV before it, and arguably every Final Fantasy since Final Fantasy VII in 1997, FFXVI is a big deal and has remained under the spotlight of millions of potential players since its reveal three years ago.

But uniquely, FFXVI is riding a wave no other Final Fantasy has been able to: the love, adoration, and critical acclaim of Final Fantasy XIV, the MMORPG directed by Naoki Yoshida and developed by Creative Business Unit III. After one of the most successful video game turnarounds in gaming history with its A Realm Reborn reboot, CBUIII has continued to strut its talent with four massive expansions. And now, it's developing the new mainline entry, using the most action-forward combat system the numbered games have ever had. And, because it requires no prior knowledge of the series, it's a great starting point for those who have never played a Final Fantasy to see what this studio is capable of.

I traveled to Square Enix's Tokyo, Japan, offices to go hands-on with FFXVI for a few hours. I experienced never-before-seen gameplay and interviewed the team for more than eight hours, learning about protagonist Clive's journey, the surrounding Mothercrystals and warring kingdoms of Valisthea, what's in store for players this summer, and perhaps most curiously, how FFXVI is bringing the series back to its medieval roots.



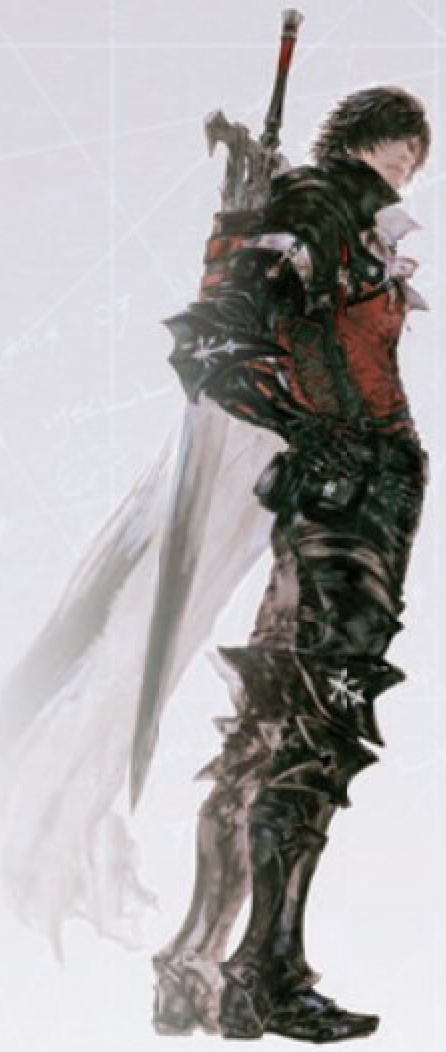
PRELUDE

For my money, FF's Prelude is one of the most iconic melodies in all of games. It's a simple series of arpeggios created by famed composer Nobuo Uematsu in less than ten minutes for the original FF. While he couldn't have possibly known its legacy at the time, it's undeniable that the central melody of this Prelude is a major facet of almost every numbered Final Fantasy game. It's an inviting, warm blanket preceding adventure. It typically plays at the game's main menu and has kept me sitting at that screen far longer than needed for over a decade. It's a bit of a shapeshifter, too, in that it's recomposed and molded into wherever and however necessary. The arpeggio might play standalone, it might be the backing to a "Stand By Me" cover by Florence + The Machine, as it is in FFXV, or it might be light and crystalline, like what's heard when logging into FFXIV.

But FFXVI's prelude, composed by FFXIV composer Masayoshi Soken, is darker. If Soken's FFXIV Prelude is bright, teasing the fantastical journey yet to come, then his Prelude for FFXVI is a brooding and infernal warning of what Clive will soon endure (although I'm told the game isn't all doom and gloom). And that tracks. The four hours of FFXVI I played, and the two hours director Hiroshi Takai and combat director Ryota Suzuki showed me in a separate, exclusive tour of the game, can best be described as dark and menacing. I witnessed one of the most brutal scenes I've seen in a game, putting the "M" in the first Mature-rated mainline Final Fantasy game, and just a taste of the revenge-fueled path it sends Clive on. And everyone on the team I speak to promises that revenge is only the start of Clive's journey, which later grows into one of war, its effects on ordinary people, and what man is to do when gods – Eikons – are making your home their battleground.

"This was one of the most difficult things I had to do on the project because you have this very recognizable melody that Uematsu-san composed," Soken tells me through a translator in the studio where he continues work on the game's score. "But, as you know, it's in a major key, and because we were aiming for something that was darker, that didn't really work. And so the first thing we had to do is change the melody from a major key to a minor key."

Soken's description of creating this darker-toned prelude aptly describes the tone of FFXVI as a whole.



CLIVE ROSFIELD
Protagonist

SETTING THE MOOD

FFXVI begins with a taste of Soken's so-far stellar score, which serves as the backdrop to one of the most bombastic openings in the series. The game quickly thrusts me into the action of the fight between two Eikons – Phoenix and Ifrit – traditionally seen as divine beings in other Final Fantasy games players can summon in combat. Producer Yoshida, the same Yoshida who directs FFXIV, has discussed how every Eikon versus Eikon fight will be unique, and this one plays like an on-rails, third-person shooter. It's cinematic, but the action is exciting and frenetic before transitioning into the present day. Here, Clive is a soldier tasked with finding and assassinating Shiva's "Dominant."

In Valisthea, special people are born with the ability to tap into Eikonic powers and actually transform into these beings. These people are known as Dominants. Soon after the game's opening, I flashback 13 years to learn that Clive was supposed to be his royal family's Dominant. Instead, the gene was passed to his younger brother, Joshua. Their mother, Duchess Anabella, resents the former, often looking down on him as lesser. But fortunately, their father, Archduke Elwin, recognizes Clive as more than just failed potential. I especially enjoy watching this dynamic play out on screen, as Clive is already uncomfortable with his nobility, likely made more unbearable by his mother's treatment. Elwin, however, is empathetic to his struggle.

Unable to fully control the literal Phoenix inside of him, Joshua is sickly, and utilizing the powers within only worsens that sickness, which is why Clive serves as Joshua's protector. This is especially problematic because Joshua's Phoenix is expected in battle, as The Grand Duchy of Rosaria is set to clash with an enemy nation over control of the Drake's Breath Mothercrystal, a massive source of aether in Valisthea which powers the magic much of society relies on.

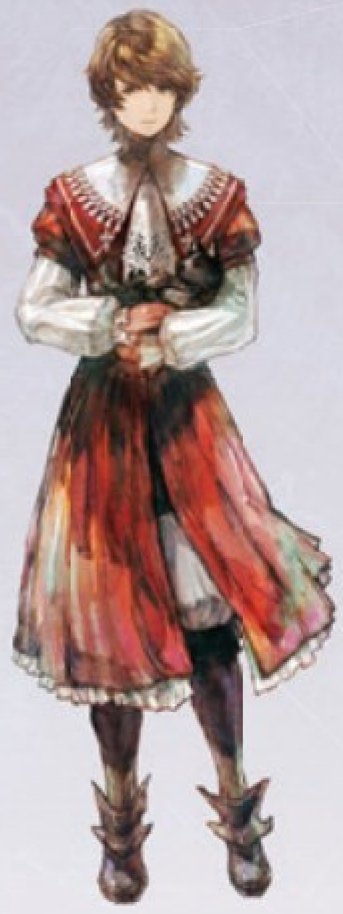
All of this feels like *Game of Thrones*, which isn't surprising considering it's one of the primary inspirations behind the game. *Game of Thrones*' fourth season on HBO was airing when the game's development started.

"We had seen it grow into this television show that was loved around the world, not just by older generations, but younger generations as well," Yoshida tells me. "So we bought the Blu-Ray boxes of Season 1, 2, 3, and 4 and made everyone on the team watch it, basically to get across to our developers that this is what's trending in the world – that this is the type of fantasy that people are enjoying."

But Yoshida said the team went to great lengths to ensure FFXVI isn't just a carbon copy – the game's other inspirations, like *Godzilla*, *Ultraman*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and *Attack on Titan* distinguish the game even further from HBO's series. It features the same mature tone of high medieval fantasy seen in *Game Of Thrones*, and surprisingly, its language is just as crass at points, which feels especially new for the franchise. But FFXVI is still decidedly Final Fantasy. There's magic, talk of crystals, chocobos, and more.

While my time in FFXVI began with a 28-year-old Clive, much of what I experience in the game happened 13 years prior, when Clive was 15. Critically, I see Joshua transform into Phoenix. It's agonizing to watch, and it's clear he's not yet comfortable doing so like other Dominants. This flashback sequence also features a fight between Phoenix and Ifrit, harkening back to the FFXVI logo (see pg. 84) beautifully depicting these two Eikons clashing. My hands-on time with young Clive culminates with him watching Joshua brutally murdered by a mystery assailant. It's gory, bloody, heartbreaking, and fantastically sold by actor Logan Hannan, the same voice actor behind Hugo de Rune of the Plague Tale series.

Unable to fight back, Clive comes to harbor a deep desire for revenge. It doesn't help that he's given the mark of a Bearer, a special face tattoo indicating he can use magic. That might sound like a prestigious mark, but the nations of Valisthea view Bearers as something other than human. These nations brand their Bearers to indicate they are enslaved, and Bearers are traded across borders based on who needs their magical abilities. As such, Clive's life is forever changed because of this tattoo.



JOSHUA ROSFIELD
Dominant of Phoenix

A NEW HOME

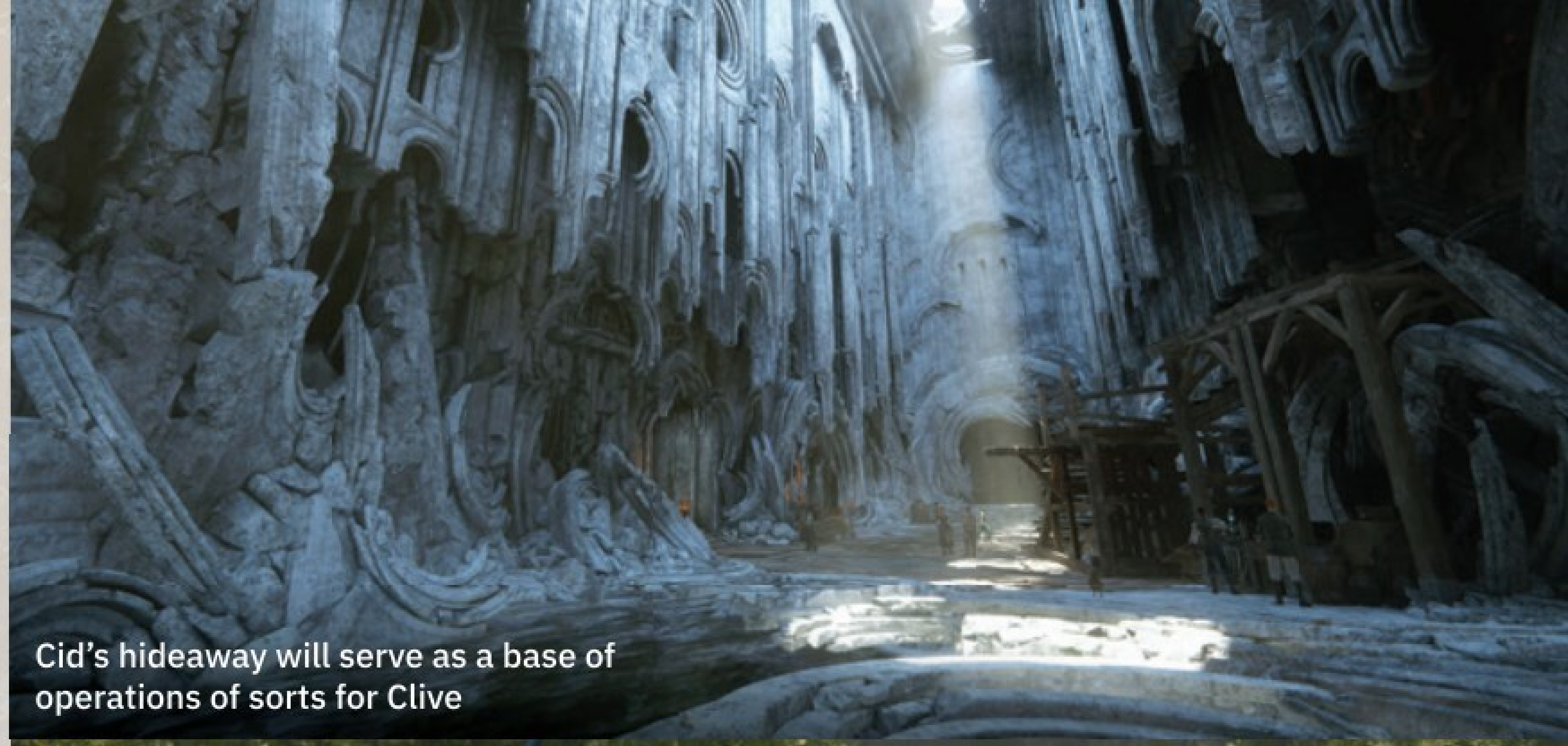
The game flashes forward once more to the 28-year-old Clive, who, after a surprising sequence of events, is dubbed a traitor by those he works for. While on the run, he meets Cidolfus Telamon, or Cid for short – because this is Final Fantasy, after all – and FFXVI's primary structure comes into sight.

Together, Clive, his companion dog Torgal – who you can pet and feed treats – and Cid make their way to Cid's hideaway, one of the main hubs in the game. Cid's hideaway looks built into a cavernous structure. There's a pub, a music player where I can select songs I discover in the world (and I suspect music from other Final Fantasy games), a blacksmith, an items store, loresman Harpocrates, and more. This hub is the launching pad for Clive's future missions around Valisthea, reached by fast-traveling on the world map, and a place to collect side quests.

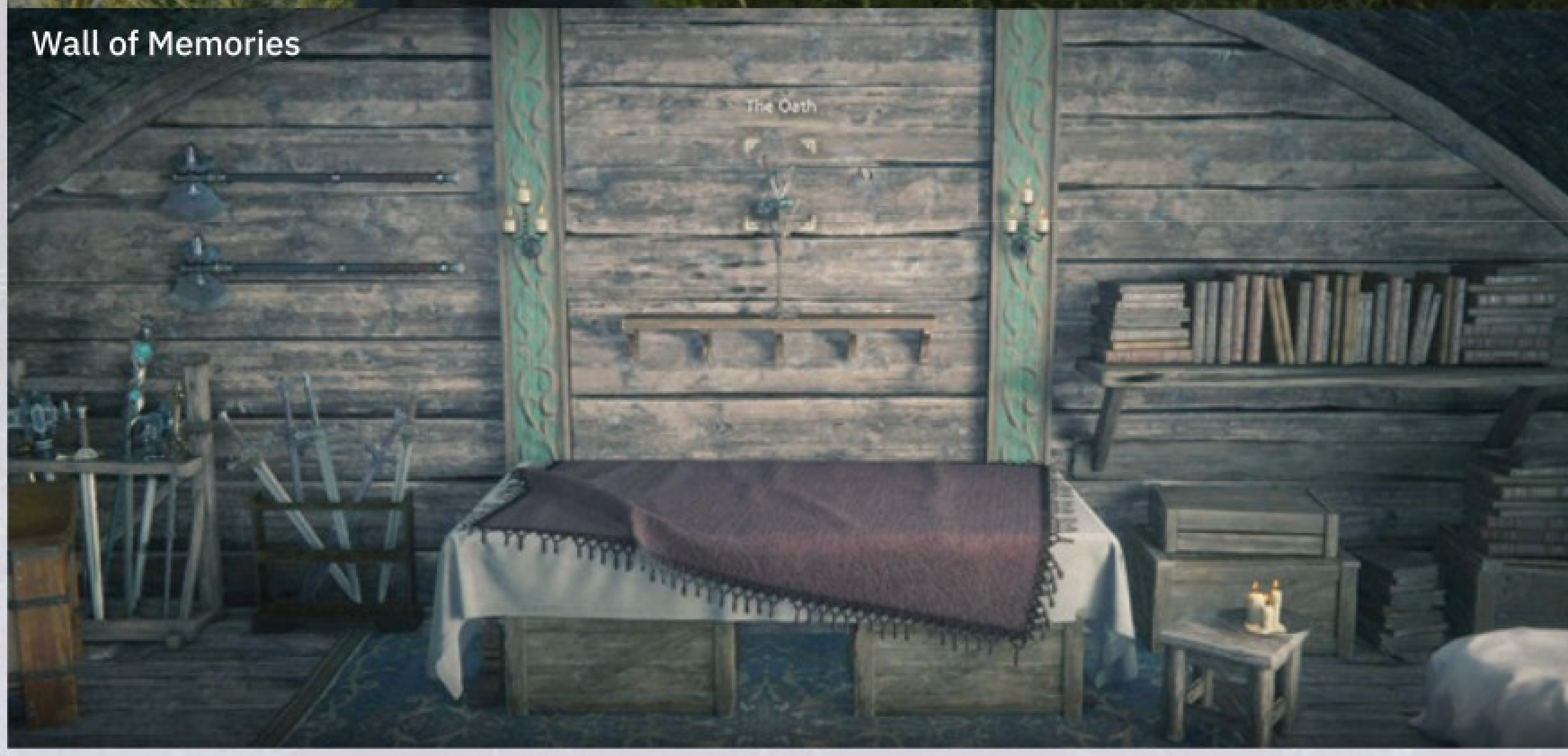
It's also home to Otto's Counter, where you'll find Otto, who can best be described as the manager of Cid's hideaway. His employee, Gaute, handles Clive's Alliant Reports, which help players keep track of Clive's ongoing relationships. It's interesting because Clive, clearly uncomfortable with the nobility he held back in Rosaria, has once more stumbled into a sense of nobility at this secret location. Here, Clive interacts with a special menu to read Alliant Reports, which hideaway scouts create to report on people in trouble across the realm. Clive can fast-travel directly to these locations to help them – or, in other words, complete a sidequest.

Not far from Gaute is The Patron's Whisper, run by Desiree, also considered part of Otto's Counter. Here, you receive gifts from people you've helped in the form of crafting resources, Gil (currency), and more. These gifts are tied to the Renown Clive earns around the realm as his name and deeds spread throughout Valisthea. These aren't the rewards you get from completing quests – you'll get those immediately – but rather, a bonus.

The third major aspect of Otto's Counter is the Hunt Board. With a good chunk of the team's leads having worked on Final Fantasy XII, it doesn't come as a surprise that FFXVI's Hunt Board looks and works similarly to that of the former. You can collect bounties and perform hunts out in the world. Sometimes, you'll stumble upon one without a bounty, but you can still complete it and earn the reward when you make it to a Hunt Board. At a Hunt location, the enemy will be boxed within a virtual arena – the fight must occur here, and if you exit the arena, the hunt will end, making it easy to escape if you're over your head.



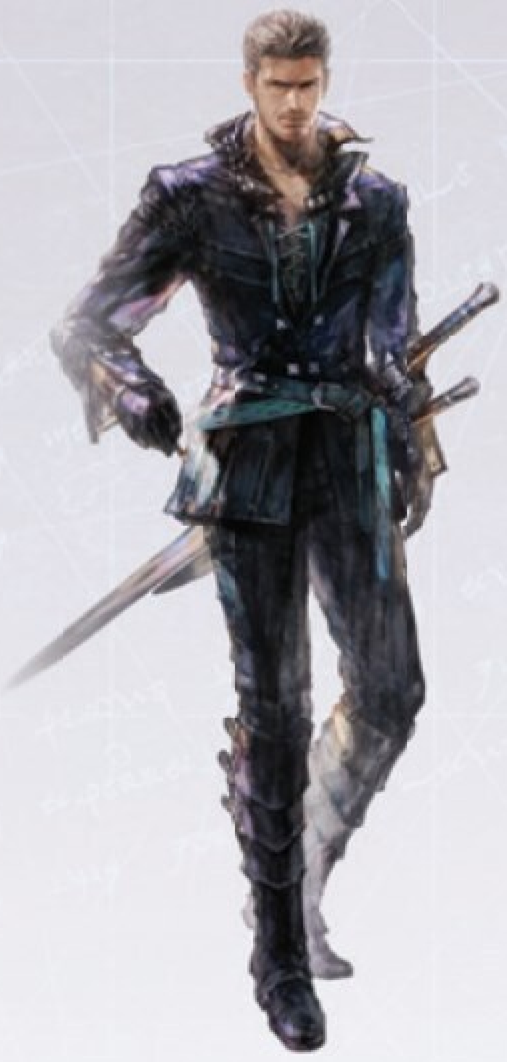
Cid's hideaway will serve as a base of operations of sorts for Clive



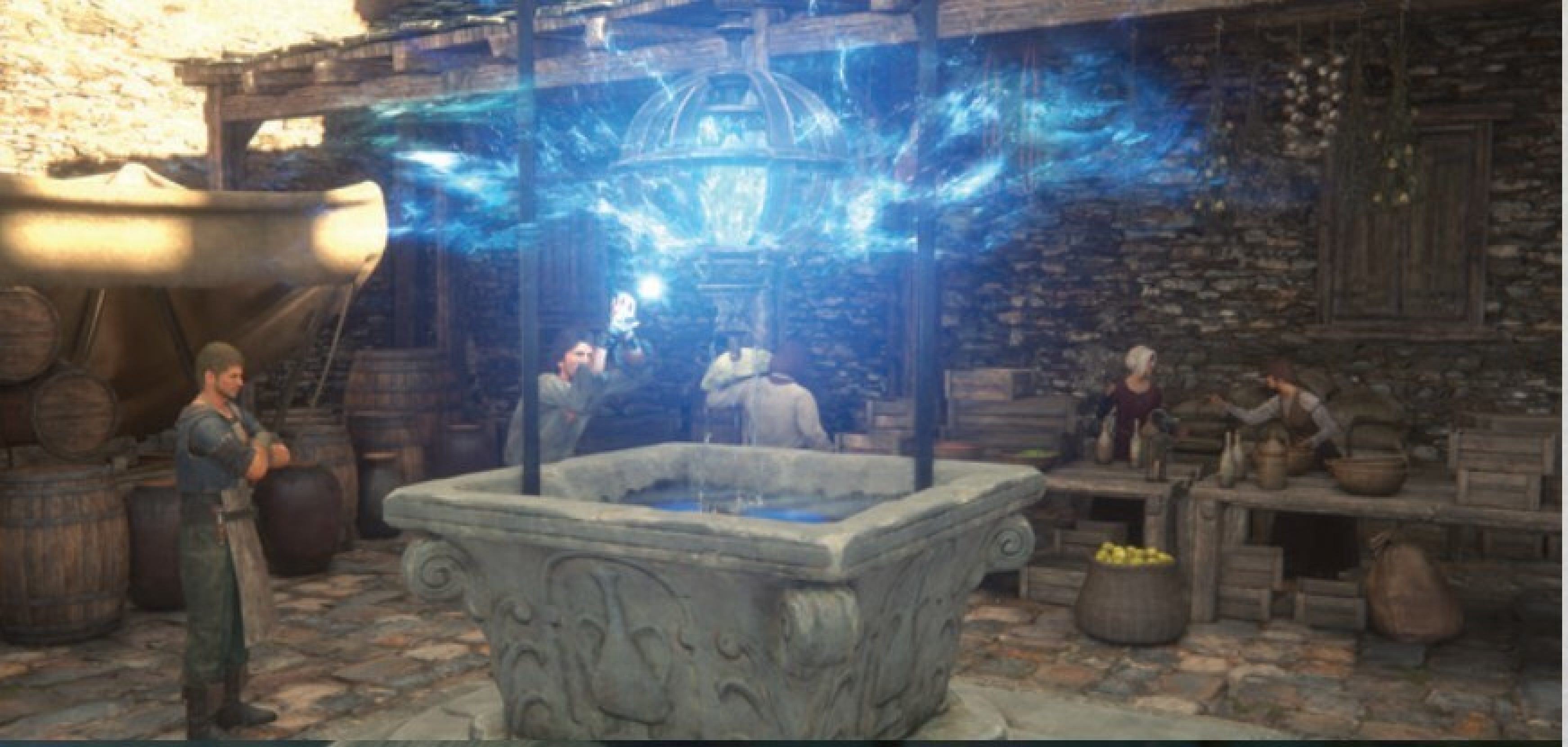
Wall of Memories

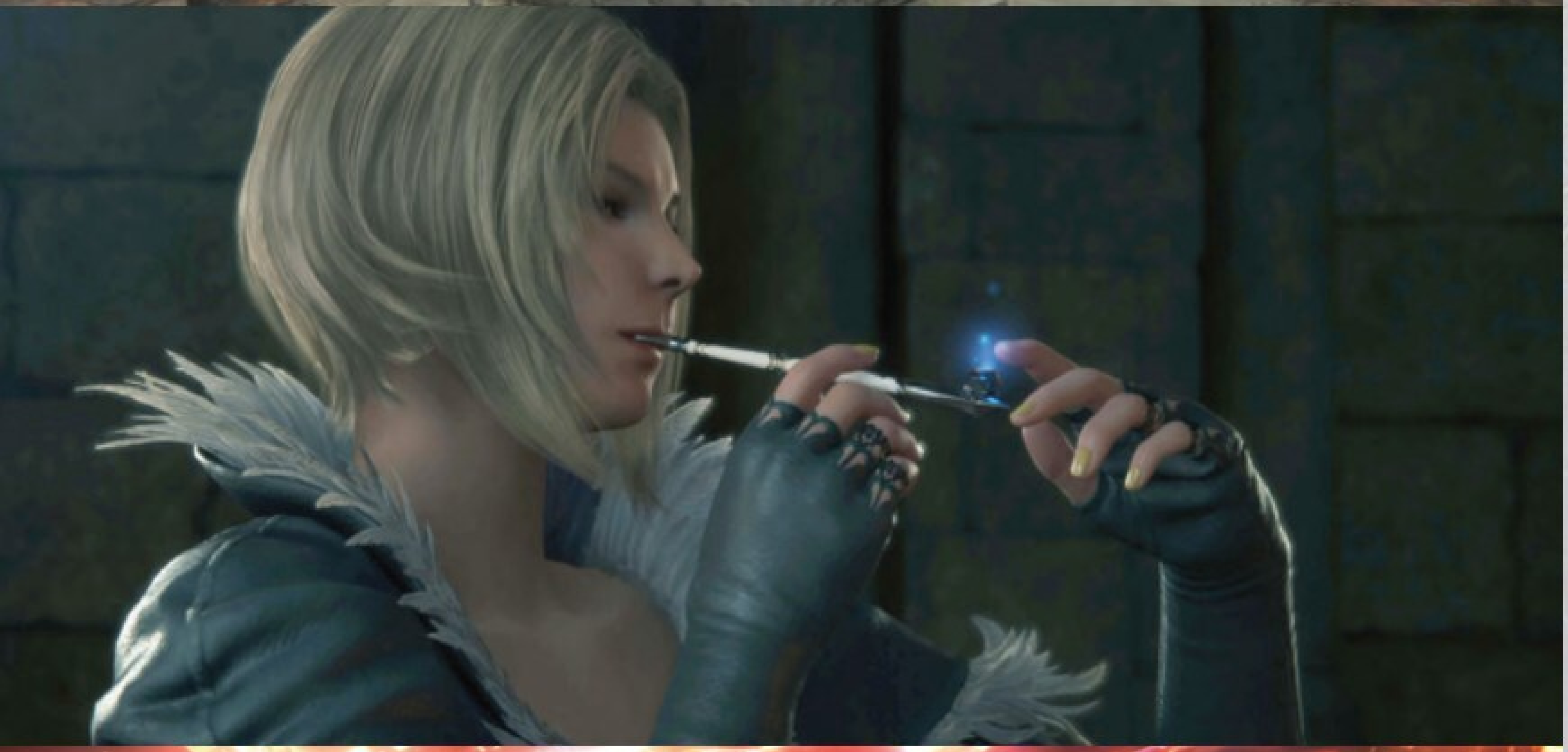
Elsewhere in Cid's hideaway is Clive's chambers. This is where he can read the letters he receives; sometimes they'll lead to new side quests, other times they're updates from characters you've interacted with, and sometimes they're warnings. You can also add some personality to Clive's room via the Wall of Memories, which begins as empty shelves and spaces where trinkets from Clive's journey will one day sit as a reminder of what he's done, where he's been, and who he's helped. I get the sense there's more to this hideaway than what I was shown and I'm excited to see more of it.

Localization director Michael-Christopher Koji Fox says the world of FFXVI isn't all politics and intrigue all the time and that CBUIII worked hard to inject minor, everyday problems into the world, demonstrated best within Cid's hideaway. Those smaller, everyday problems stem from something larger happening in Valisthea and the driving force behind the game: the depletion of Mothercrystals.



CIDOLFUS TELAMON
Dominant of Ramuh

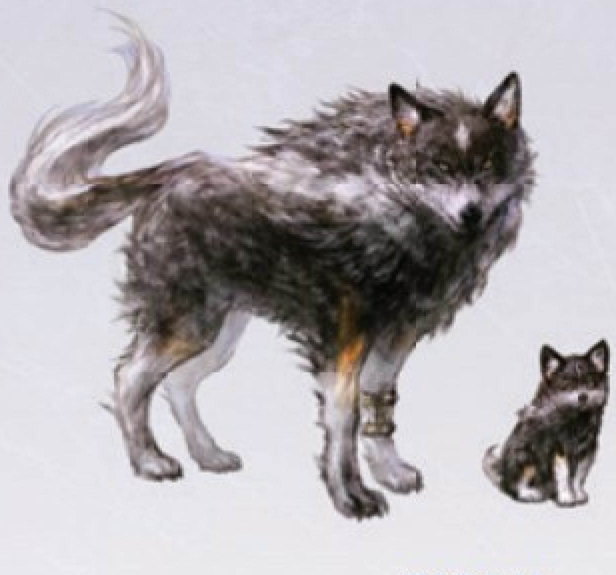




These massive crystals are akin to oil fields in our world, Takai says, describing how Valisthean kingdoms have fought over control of Mothercystals much in the way our societies have fought entire wars over oil. Similar to how oil powers a lot of our world, Mothercrystals power much of Valisthea.

The crystals' aether powers forges capable of melting steel, and it's behind the water people drink and is even used for minute things like lighting a pipe. Koji says if you ask, “How do they do that in Valisthea?” the answer is likely magic powered by the Mothercrystals.

“Why do we need to find a way to make fire hot when we can just use a fire crystal and make the fire hotter? You don't need to invent bows and arrows in a world where you have magical projectiles that can be shot via a crystal,” he says. “And so because you have these people relying on the magic, they don't learn how to do a lot of stuff, and they rely in some places too much on these crystals.



TORGAL
Companion

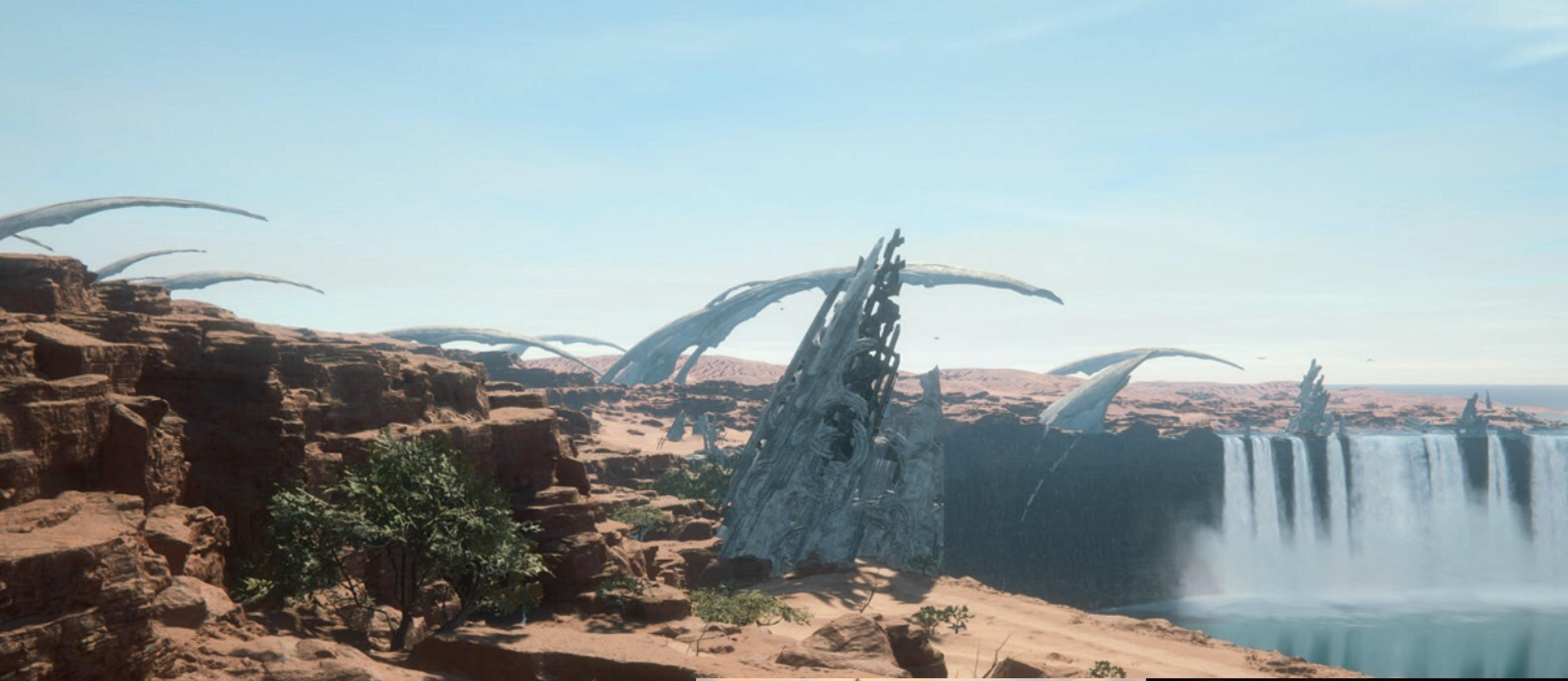
“[This reliance] becomes one of those centerpieces in the narrative: what happens when the magic starts to run out? How are we going to pour our water? How are we going to dry our laundry? And instead of figuring out ways to light their cigarettes without a crystal, the first thing they think of is, ‘Well, we need to go and invade this country and get their crystal because that one is still working.’”

While I didn't get to witness much of this during my playtime, it's clear Clive's story of revenge will bring him to the broader table of conflict and war happening around these crystals.

“Revenge is just that gateway into the rest of the game,” creative director Kazutoyo Maehiro says. “At least from my perspective, we believe [FFXVI] is about learning about yourself and accepting yourself, and through this story of revenge and love and all these different things, you see that this kind of takes us to the point of Clive needing to learn about himself in life and accepting who he is and his fate and the troubles that come with that.”

As Clive's journey expands outward from revenge, so does his explorable world. From a gorgeously designed tilt-shifted world map, Clive can select main mission dungeons or open field areas, and both offer unique experiences. One main mission had me running Clive, alongside an A.I.-controlled Cid, through the Greatwood, a linear dungeon filled with various enemies, minibosses, and a final boss to defeat. The game's Devil May Cry-style combat shines here as I use Clive's projectile magic, sword attacks, and Eikonic abilities from Phoenix to slay enemies. I can see why party members, which consists of a revolving cast of characters weaving in and out of Clive's quests, are controlled by A.I., and the same can be said for Torgal the dog. Although I'm able to control what Torgal focuses on, Clive's combat requires my full attention. These dungeons, or stages, are reminiscent of Devil May Cry V's mission structure. But FFXVI's open field areas are much different.

I ran around one for about 20 minutes near where the Rosarian duchy once resided. It was a gorgeous, picturesque landscape with ruined aqueducts, a cobblestone road, a waterfall, marshy land, and home to various monsters. There's a main and side quest here, but I'm not allowed to interact with either. However, I enjoy how many enemies there are to fight and discover some hidden treasure chests in the area too. Most impressive is the open field's size. It takes me about 20 minutes to experience all this section of the open field has to offer, but when I zoom out on the map, I realize this was maybe an eighth of the entire open field area. There are multiple of these in the game, and I'm excited to explore each and see how they vary.



You'll find remnants and ancient structures of The Fallen like this throughout Valisthea

Hideaway loresman Harpocrates

CRYSTAL CHRONICLES

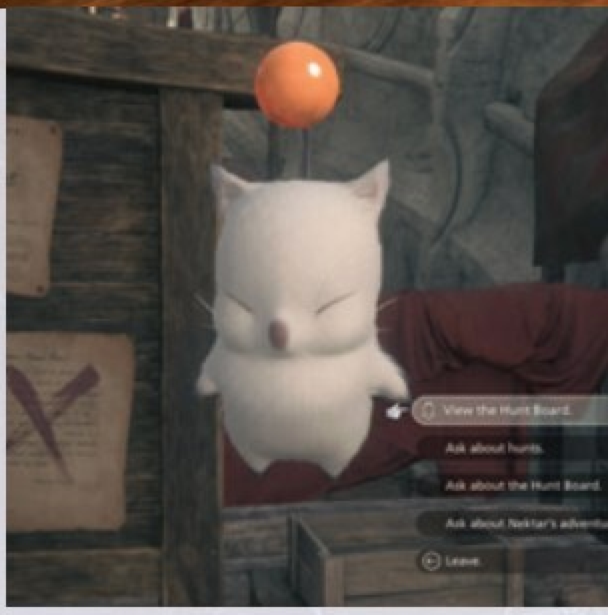
I learn about the Fallen, or rather, their ruined structures while running about this area, too. "They had a civilization that was highly advanced [and] they advanced to a point where they were able to leave the land and create their cities in the air," Koji says. "Like Icarus flying too close to the sun, they went a little bit too far."

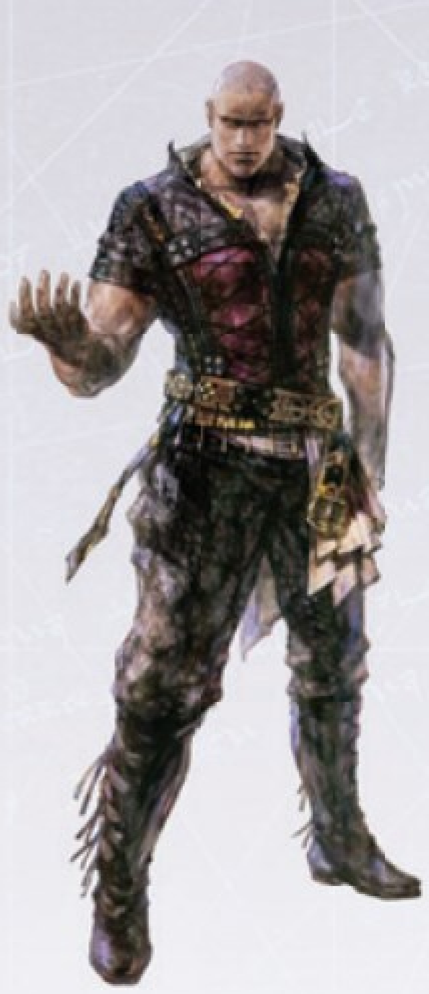
The 1500-year-old ruins have fallen from the sky and into Valisthea, serving as a reminder of the Fallen's hubris and how they got too close to God. Koji won't tell me much more, although he mentions the Fallen play a central role in the story, especially later in the game. From talking with Koji, who Yoshida calls the team's loremaster, it's clear a lot of work went into creating the history of Valisthea. He says it's because Maehiro is a history buff, calling on various parts of medieval history to inform FFXVI.

"A lot of times in medieval history, you would have a lot of kingdoms, and we wanted to have kingdoms as well," Maehiro says. "When we knew we were going to settle on five main nations in Valisthea, having them all be kingdoms means everything's going to be the same – you're always going to have a king making all the decisions, and it trickles down from there. And when telling a story, it becomes really one-sided."

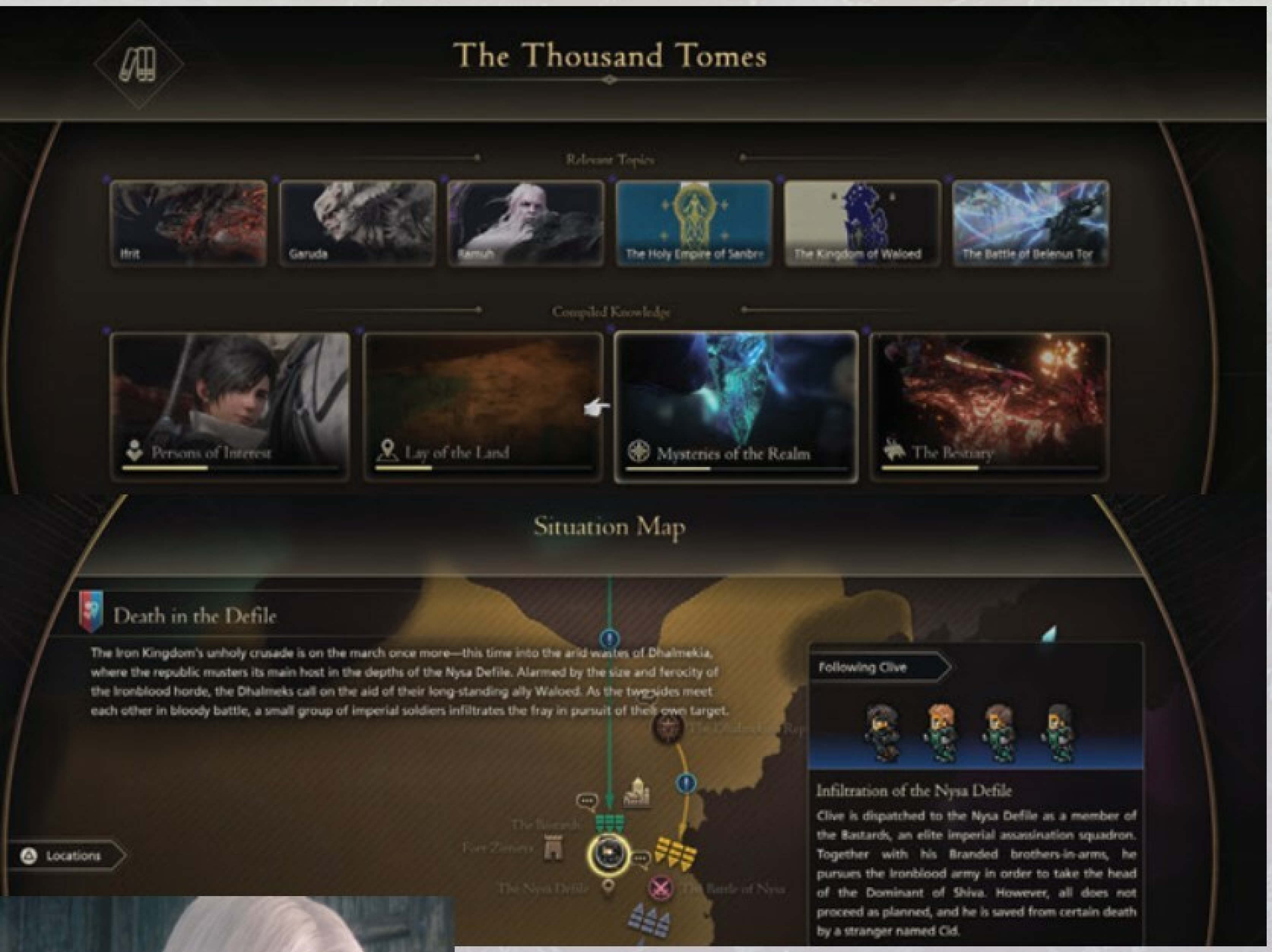
These five nations are different to give the story more depth, Maehiro says, which is why you have a holy empire, a grand duchy, a kingdom, a republic, and more. But none of that happened before Maehiro created a world map for Valisthea, which was his first objective. Using the world map, he determined the geography of different locations and how nations might work based on the surrounding environment.

The history and world makeup of Valisthea play a significant role in setting the stakes for FFXVI. In a lesson learned from criticism of *Game of Thrones*, CBUIII is working to provide in-game systems that will help players keep up with key names, nations, and more. As Clive experiences more of the world, he can check in with hideaway loreman Harpocrates. You'll see a cute pixel version of Clive and Harpocrates on screen as Clive's wisdom increases, which unlocks new entries in The Thousand Tomes. This lore compilation is akin to what might be a journal or encyclopedia in other games, but it's more interactive and extensive, reading more like a fascinating history book than a list of names and places. It features hundreds of entries ranging from flora, fauna, geography, history, cities, and people, and it only grows as you play through the game.





HUGO KUPKA
Dominant of Titan



Death in the Defile

The Iron Kingdom's unholy crusade is on the march once more—this time into the arid wastes of Dhalmekia, where the republic musters its main host in the depths of the Nysa Defile. Alarmed by the size and ferocity of the Ironblood horde, the Dhalmeks call on the aid of their long-standing ally Waloed. As the two sides meet each other in bloody battle, a small group of imperial soldiers infiltrates the fray in pursuit of their own target.

Infiltration of the Nysa Defile

Clive is dispatched to the Nysa Defile as a member of the Bastards, an elite imperial assassination squadron. Together with his Branded brothers-in-arms, he pursues the Ironblood army in order to take the head of the Dominant of Shiva. However, all does not proceed as planned, and he is saved from certain death by a stranger named Cid.

Vivian Ninetales

Related to The Thousand Tomes is the game's Active Time Lore system, which allows you to pull up informational entries about characters, names, locations, and other things happening on screen during any cutscene, or at any other point in the game, for a quick refresher. It's impressive being able to pause a cutscene or the action and immediately be taken right to the information you might want to better understand what's happening.

Another character, Vivian Ninetales, is a scholar who acts as your loremaster for current events, a great supplement to Harpocrates' knowledge of Valisthea's history. Her menu looks less like an encyclopedia and more like a family tree, with lines connecting characters with tidbits of information to explain those connections. And I'm told that as the game progresses, and as these relationships between characters and nations change in real-time, so does Vivian's current events timeline. But you can go back and forth between different periods of the game's timeline to understand where the characters were and who they are now, complete with "minimovies" too. Characters are separated into "The Grand Cast" while nation relationships fall under the "Situation Map," and together, these two menus make up "The State of the Realm."

It's an interesting in-world take on lore, and as someone who likes to dive deep into the lore of Final Fantasy games, I'm excited to see just how far these systems stretch along Clive's journey. It's also an interesting response to the criticism that the amount of information *Game of Thrones*, this game's primary inspiration, throws at you at any given point is challenging to keep up with.

BENEDIKTA HARMAN
Dominant of Garuda

ENDGAME

After FFXVI's opening hours, Takai gives me a tour of the endgame content awaiting players once they roll credits. As previously announced, FFXVI features an unlockable Arcade Mode, allowing players to run through stages they've already completed, this time with an on-screen score calculator and combat grader. But there are two more versions awaiting players, depending on how they approach New Game+.

New Game+ is primarily for players looking for a more difficult playthrough of FFXVI. You can experience the game on the same difficulty as your original run if you'd like, but Stage Replay is likely the more apt mode as it allows you to get treasures and PlayStation trophies you might've missed. And there's a special training area accessed through your hideaway's Arete Stone, a statue giving you access to supplementary in-game content. You can customize dozens of options in training to practice against especially tough monsters or complete a quick battle if you're simply after a speedy combat fix. But New Game+ is also home to Final Fantasy Mode, which increases the game's difficulty, changes monster placement, and even remixes which enemies might appear in combat.

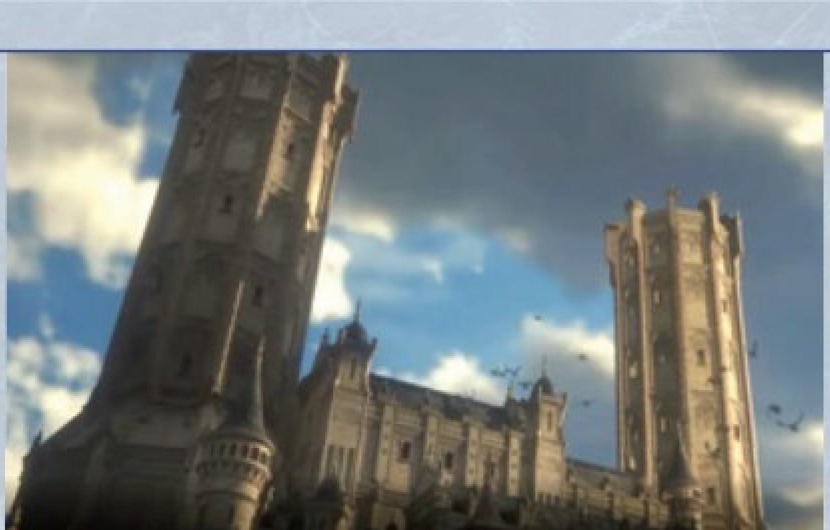
"The main design philosophy is that the first playthrough is about learning Clive, learning the controls, and then enjoying the story," Suzuki says. "The second playthrough, we want to shift that focus, because the story hasn't changed, to the action. For example, in Story Mode, while players may encounter waves of enemies, a lot of times, enemies don't attack at once to allow players to be able to handle everything. In the harder modes of the game, we have removed these limitations so that you have multiple enemies all attacking Clive at the same time.

"Basically, what we've done with [Final Fantasy] Mode is give players controlling Clive the sense that they're always in danger, that death is around the corner, and that you'll need to really, really pay attention to be able to clear the content."

Within Final Fantasy Mode's Arcade Mode, accessible through the Arete Stone in your hideaways, you'll find you can complete stages in Arcade Mode through Final Fantasy Mode or the even more difficult Ultimaniac Mode. Arcade Mode's global leaderboards will only be active in these two modes.

"[These modes were] pretty much created solely for the hardcore players. Those players that pride themselves on their skills in action games," Suzuki continues, citing that the only reward that comes with these modes is pride. "[It's] a challenge that, even for them, is going to be very difficult to complete."

THE Nations OF Valisthea

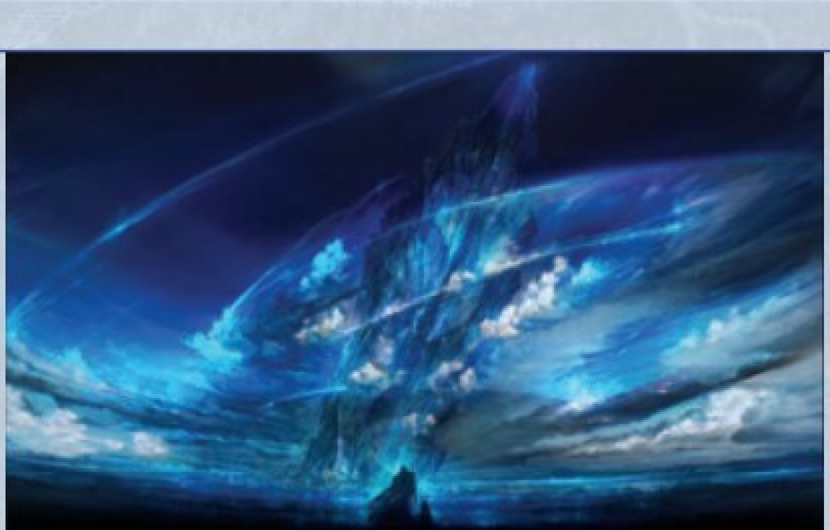


THE GRAND DUCHY OF ROSARIA

Bastion of Tradition

A group of small independent provinces in Western Valisthea formed to create this nation long ago, which now draws upon the Drake's Breath Mothercrystal for aether. It's where the story of FFXVI begins, and is the home of Clive and Joshua Rosfield

Home of the Dominant of the Phoenix

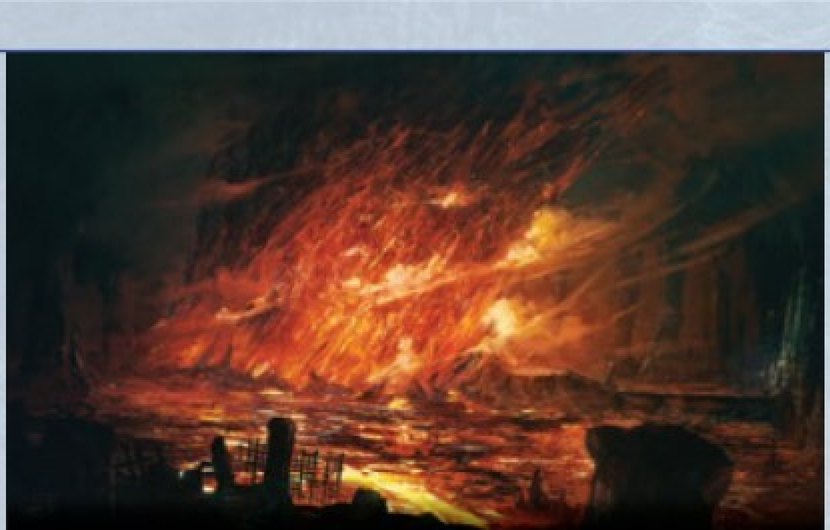


THE CRYSTALLINE DOMINION

The Unblinking Eye of the Storm

A peace treaty armistice keeps this small plot of land home to the Drake's Tail Mothercrystal neutral, but as the need for more aether increases amongst the other five nations, this dominion's neutrality might be in jeopardy

Because of this dominion's neutral state, no Dominant calls it home

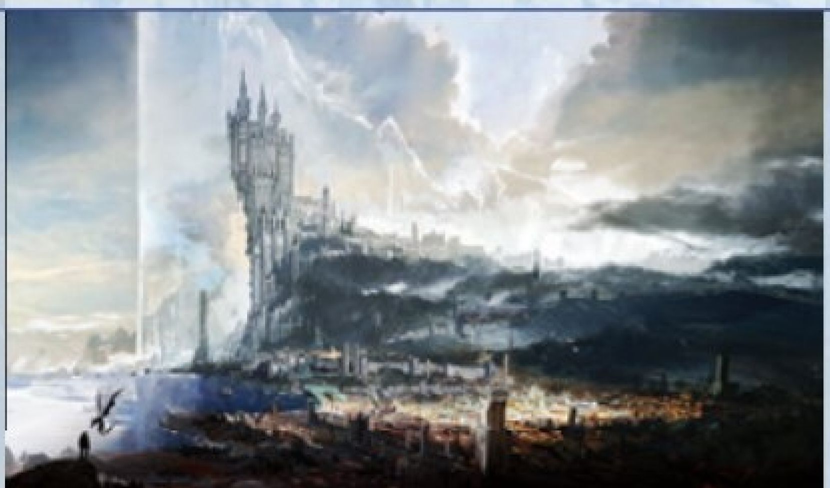


THE IRON KINGDOM

Forged in Faith and Fear

The Iron Kingdom is composed of a small group of five islands off the coast of Storm, the western half of Valisthea's twin realms, and here, the extreme Crystalline Orthodox faith dictates everything underneath the shadow of the Drake's Breath Mothercrystal, the very same crystal the Grand Duchy of Rosaria draws its power from

No Dominant calls this kingdom home as its people view dominants as unholy abominations, strictly executed upon birth

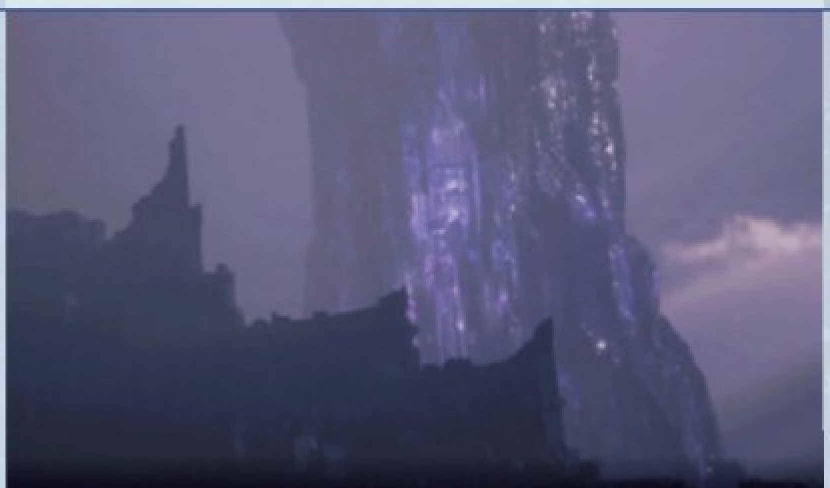


THE HOLY EMPIRE OF SANBREQUE

Where Ambition is Divine

The largest theocratic force in Valisthea, Sanbreque is home to the holy capital of Oriflamme, built around Drake's Head, a massive Mothercrystal that supplies the people with an abundance of magical ether

Home of the Dominant of Bahamut

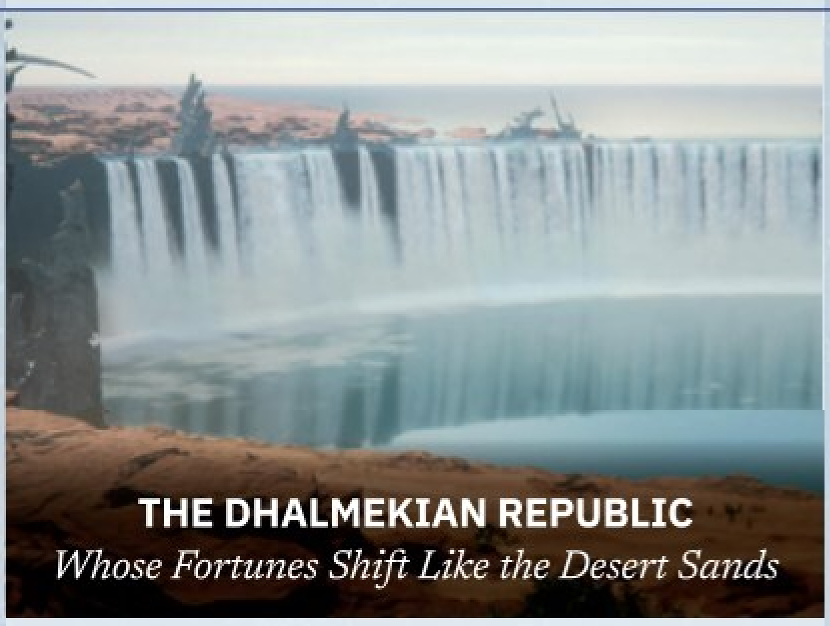


THE KINGDOM OF WALOED

Indomitable in its Isolation

Waloed claims the eastern half of Valisthea as its dominion, and while much of this nation remains a mystery, we know it's powered by the Drake's Spine Mothercrystal, making it an attractive location for any kingdom warring over aether

Home of the Dominant of Odin



THE DHALMEKIAN REPUBLIC

Whose Fortunes Shift Like the Desert Sands

Made up of five parliament states, this republic's Mothercrystal, Drake's Fang, lies in the heart of a mountain range, allowing it to keep its dominion, a large portion of southern Valisthea, safe from intruders

Home of the Dominant of Titan

The Eikon Shiva

The “Titan Lost” Form of the Eikon Titan

Diversity IN FFXVI

FFXVI’s biggest criticism in the lead-up to launch has been its lack of diversity. With an almost entirely white cast (at least in what’s been shown so far), players have criticized the game for its lack of people of color, especially given that it takes place across an entire continent. Producer Naoki Yoshida said to *IGN* that because medieval Europe heavily inspired the game and that because FFXVI’s story takes place on a single landmass geographically and culturally isolated from the rest of the world, Valisthea was never going to be as realistically diverse as modern-day Earth. He told the publication that while incorporating diversity into Valisthea was important, an over-incorporation into this smaller section of a larger world could violate the narrative boundaries the team set for itself.

This led to further criticism – mind you, deservedly so because, after all, why does a fictional world have boundaries diversity could violate in a game featuring magic, giant god beasts, and more – which Yoshida addressed earlier this year. He told *IGN* in a new interview that the team created Valisthea using a great deal of research and investigation into various cultures and value systems from around the world. As a result, the team hopes players will resonate with some of these cultures and values and, ultimately, connect with the game’s universal themes and experience as a whole.

I asked Yoshida if he had anything new to add to his thoughts on the game’s diversity.

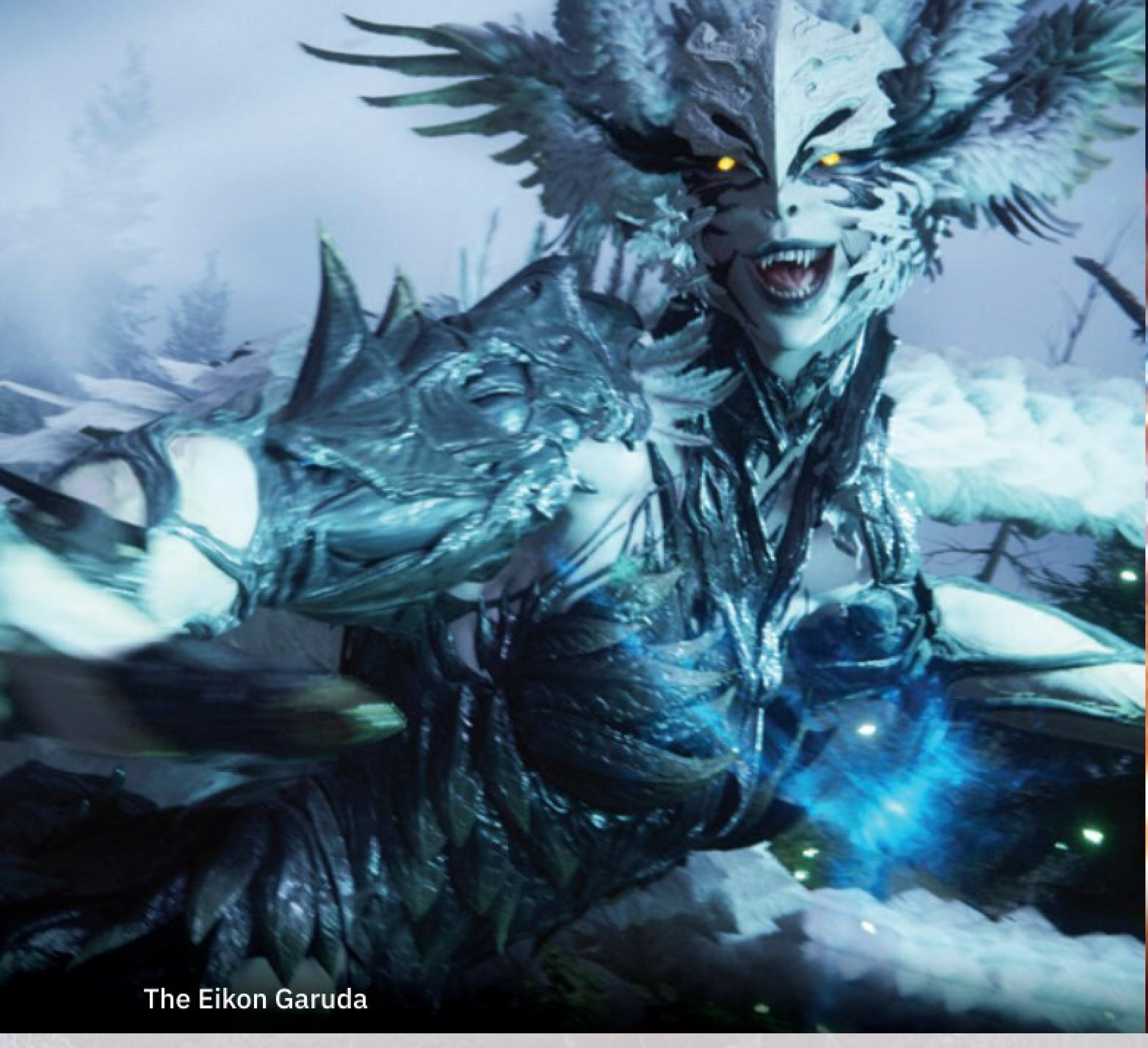
“It’s ultimately going to come down to when players pick up the game and play for themselves and see what we have [created],” he tells me. “And finally, see what we have aimed for in our narrative, in how we depict our characters. That involves not only how they appear on the outside but how they appear on the inside. [We] could talk about it more, but it’s ultimately going to be of the players deciding for themselves. That said, we have heard the various feedback regarding this issue and do not take it lightly, and hope to incorporate what we have learned into our team's work moving forward.”

That’s just one new thing awaiting you in a more challenging run of New Game+, though. New Game+ also opens Clive up to even more upgrades for his weapons. You can also upgrade accessories, which is only possible in the game in a Final Fantasy Mode playthrough in New Game+. In that same playthrough, you’ll also gain access to the Final Chronolith Trials, or if you’re not in Final Fantasy Mode, just Chronolith Trials.

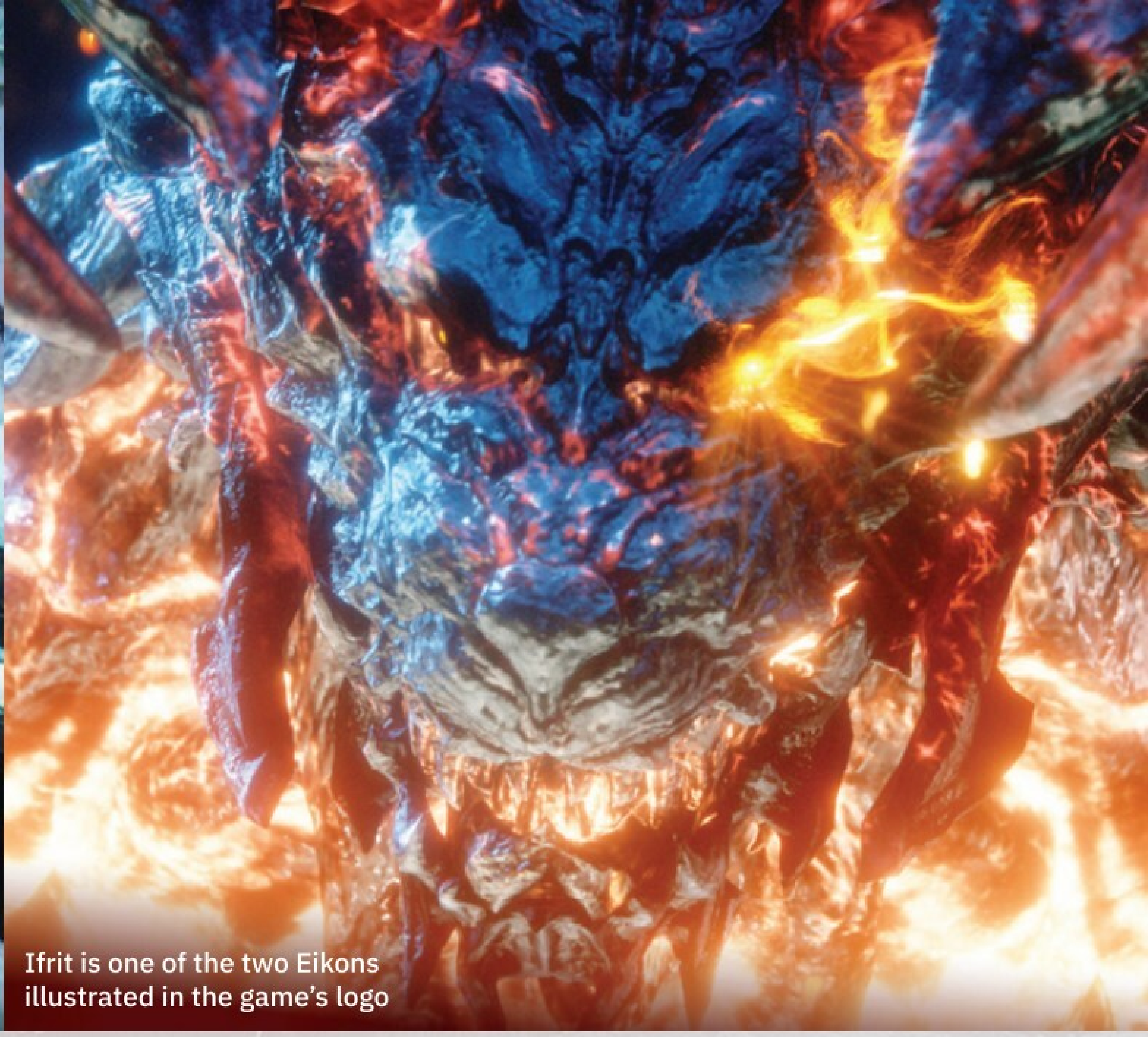
Arguably the most difficult challenge in FFXVI, these trials consist of multiple stages, each with four rounds of enemies. The first three rounds will be standard waves of monsters you’ve fought elsewhere in the game, but the fourth round will feature a boss. Each is a time trial, and every stage contains a list of moves, combos, and objectives you can execute to gain more time. However, pulling them off won’t be easy; there’s no healing in these trials, save for recovery that immediately begins after activating any Limit Break move.

Each trial is based on an Eikon. In the Phoenix’s Trial by Fire, you’ll only have access to Phoenix’s Eikonic abilities, forcing you to play much differently than you might outside these trials, where you can mix and match Eikonic abilities on the fly. And like Arcade Mode, the Chronolith Trials contain a global leaderboard but only in Final Fantasy Mode. As you play through the game, you’ll find stones similar in appearance to the Arete Stone, and they unlock Chronolith Trials for you to complete.

I can’t go hands-on with any of this endgame content, but what Takai shows me is blisteringly chaotic, fast-paced, and sure to bring the challenge fans of Devil May Cry might expect – a relevant comparison as Suzuki helped design combat in Devil May Cry V.



The Eikon Garuda



Ifrit is one of the two Eikons illustrated in the game's logo

A REALM, BORN

Takai says FFXVI landed on the plate of CBUIII roughly seven years ago, which I find fascinating. That places pre-production planning around 2016, which means Square Enix decided to hand the sixteenth Final Fantasy game to CBUIII after the team's MMO received its first expansion, 2015's Heavensward. FFXIV is praised today, but CBUIII was still in proving ground territory at this point in the MMO's life. The studio successfully rebooted FFXIV and Heavensward was well received, but FFXIV wasn't yet lauded then like it is today. When Square Enix revealed CBUIII as FFXVI's developer, it seemed like a no-brainer move, but I'm not sure this was the case in 2016. Perhaps by intuition, luck, confidence, or a mix of each, Square Enix, seven years ago, picked a studio that would grow to become one of the most beloved in games to develop its next mainline Final Fantasy, and all signs point to this decision paying off.

Yoshida has emphasized how honored CBUIII was to receive the call to develop FFXVI in all three times I've spoken with him over the past year about the game. He's been keen to emphasize how fantastic the opportunity has been. But Yoshida, Takai, Soken, and many other members of the CBUIII team have had to juggle FFXVI's development over the past seven years of FFXIV's development. The secret as to how, according to everyone I spoke with, is extensive planning. The studio had created the world of Valisthea, its history, its characters, an idea of the game's combat, and the main scenario well in advance of putting hands to computer mice to create it, although Suzuki greatly refined the combat after being brought on roughly two years into development.

The core planning team decided on these things before expanding to include full studio support. The team soon realized in this process that this game would have a Mature rating, which despite what I thought, Yoshida says wasn't a big deal for Square Enix. He jokes that perhaps he's not as fearful of his corporate overlookers as he should be, but says Square Enix understood why the team needed to be free from rating restraint with FFXVI. It doesn't hurt that Yoshida is on Square Enix's board of directors, either.

Cidolfus Telamon and Benedikta Harman face off

Lv 14 HP 1086
Precision Dodge
3 Potion
2 High Potion
2 Strength Tonic
Attack

Takai says it's harder and harder not to make Mature-rated games these days, anyway. A big staple of Final Fantasy games is the visuals. While the series has never really aimed for realism narratively, it has used technological advancements in hardware to make worlds look more and more believable, despite their fantastical elements. When designing a world where brothers are brutally murdered, where gods lay waste to entire environments, and where medieval characters act like real people, a Mature rating was inevitable, Takai says, noting that rating restrictions have also continued to grow stricter.

"We're not using this M rating as an excuse to make the game hyperviolent," Takai adds. "It's just that we wanted to have a real feel with the game, and again, the M rating helps us do that, [to] maintain that reality."

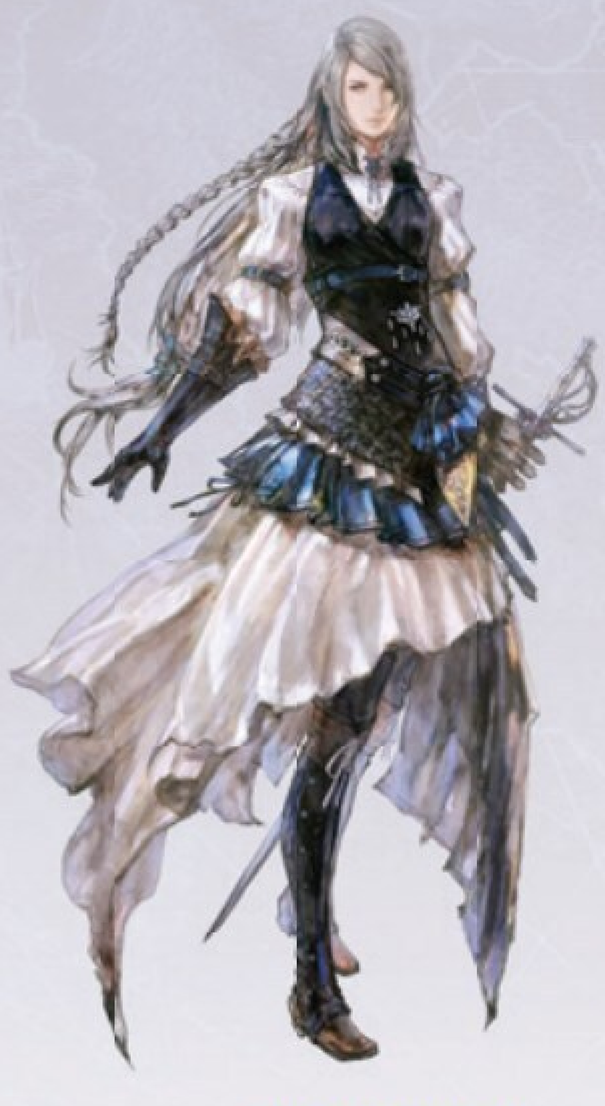
Art director Hiroshi Minagawa adds that the *Game of Thrones* inspiration led the team toward a darker, more Mature-rated world, too, from a visual perspective. He says character designer Kazuya Takahashi's character art informed a lot of FFXVI's visual design but that his art featured a lot of "bright and transparent" types of environments, which is still present in some parts of the game but had to be pared back in some places to fit the game's grittier tone. The environments also needed to be designed in such a way that one minute they might be beautiful, but another minute, on fire and destroyed.

"When I joined the project, I remember Takai-san said its concept was 'summon pro wrestling,' that's how he described what they were trying to do," Minagawa says. "Instead of having these Eikons shoot magic at each other and fight, it's more like they're going to get in and grapple. It's going to be close quarters; they're going to be using their bodies as opposed to ranged attacks. And so I really think that type of concept affected the design; you're going to have a design that's more suited to these close-up encounters."

At the core of the game's visual design, more so than the concepts described above, was the FFXVI logo, designed by legendary illustrator Yoshitaka Amano, that the team returned to often.

"When I first joined on the project, that [image of Phoenix clashing with Ifrit in flames] was one of the first things that we came up with," Minagawa adds. "We knew that the game was about the Eikons and about fire and finding a great way to represent that and creating an image that kind of represents all of those things all in one image of epic scale, so that's what I think [...] is the image that will stick with fans throughout their journey."

Some seven years after the game's creation began, FFXVI went gold in March. Takai says going gold was an important milestone for the team and that despite most teams in the industry transitioning from going gold to working on a day one patch, CBUIII is not currently planning a day one patch. He claims it's a mix of the team's confidence in its final build and because he and Yoshida believe the game should be ready to go on day one, recognizing



JILL WARRICK
Dominant of Shiva

Lv. 30 HP 1748
Potion
High Potion
Strength Tonic

that not everyone has access to the internet needed to download a day one patch during FFXVI's global simultaneous release. Of course, the team is still testing the game daily and searching for bugs, and things could change, but right now, like in the days of old Final Fantasy, this entry should work entirely as expected out of the box.

As for post-launch, the team doesn't have any DLC plans to announce – the team's priority is getting the game into players' hands. However, Takai, Yoshida, and other team members reiterate that they created Valisthea to be vast and that it's a world the team would like to return to. I get the sense that if the demand is there, CBUIII is ready on a moment's notice to return to this world, perhaps through DLC or, harkening back to its MMO expertise, an expansion. At this point, considering Final Fantasy games of late like FFXV and Final Fantasy VII Remake did receive DLC, it'd be unusual to see FFXVI not receive any. Takai says there aren't any plans for non-game tie-ins a la FFXV's *Kingsglaive* film to supplement the world of FFXVI for the time being.

As for the PC version, it sounds like it's on the way, but Yoshida stresses that it will be longer than six months before players see or possibly even hear about it. I'm guessing he mentions six months because FFXVI has a six-month exclusive window on PlayStation 5, but he stresses that this window being up does not mean the PC version will go live then or anytime soon thereafter.

With FFXIV, Yoshida and the rest of CBUIII get to grow with the community, expand on the MMO's world of Eorzea, and ultimately watch it live well beyond launch. With FFXVI, though, that's not the case. It's a game designed with a beginning and finite end. That's new for this team, but it's something CBUIII is excited about just weeks away from launch.

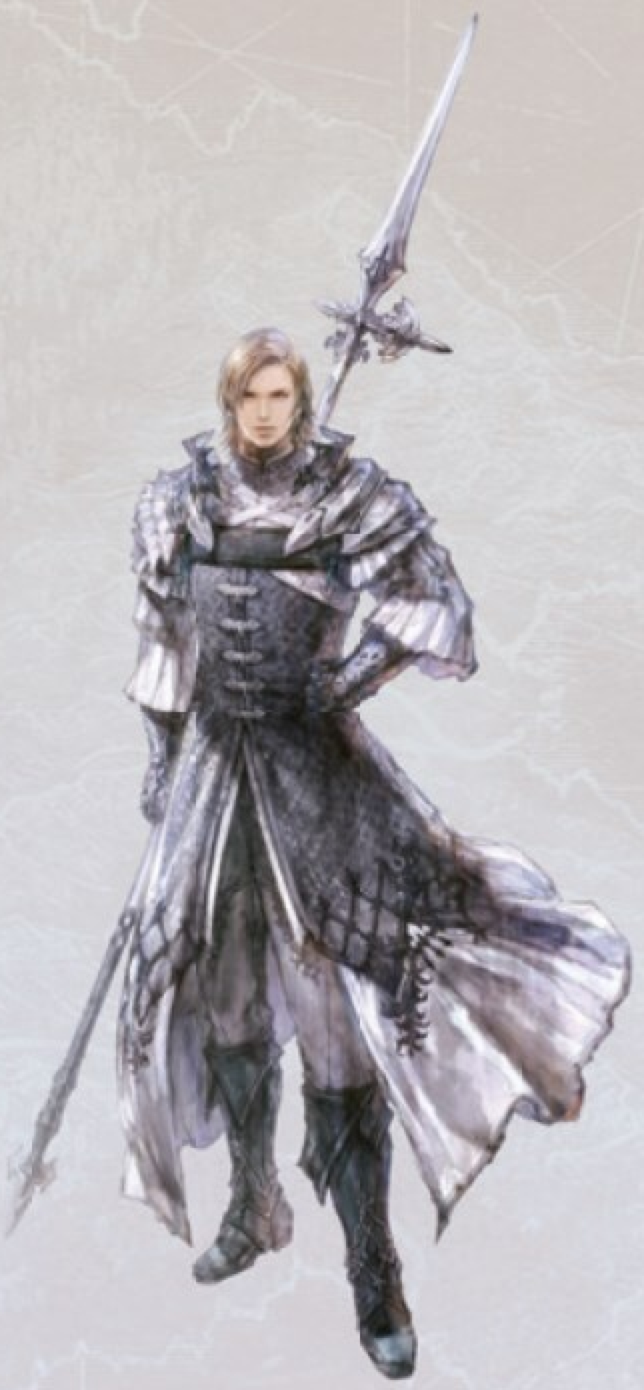
"It's a one-off game. We're asking players to pay the full price for this experience, and so we want an experience that's going to equal the amount of money that players are going to be paying, and we want them to have satisfaction equal to what they paid or even more than that," Yoshida says.

"We have no idea if people are going to fall in love with Valisthea and fall in love with Clive's story and want to see more of the world or more of its characters. So while we always want to consider DLC or spinoffs or those types of things where you can learn more about the game, first we want to see if Valisthea and Clive are really things players around the world want to see more of and then make that decision."

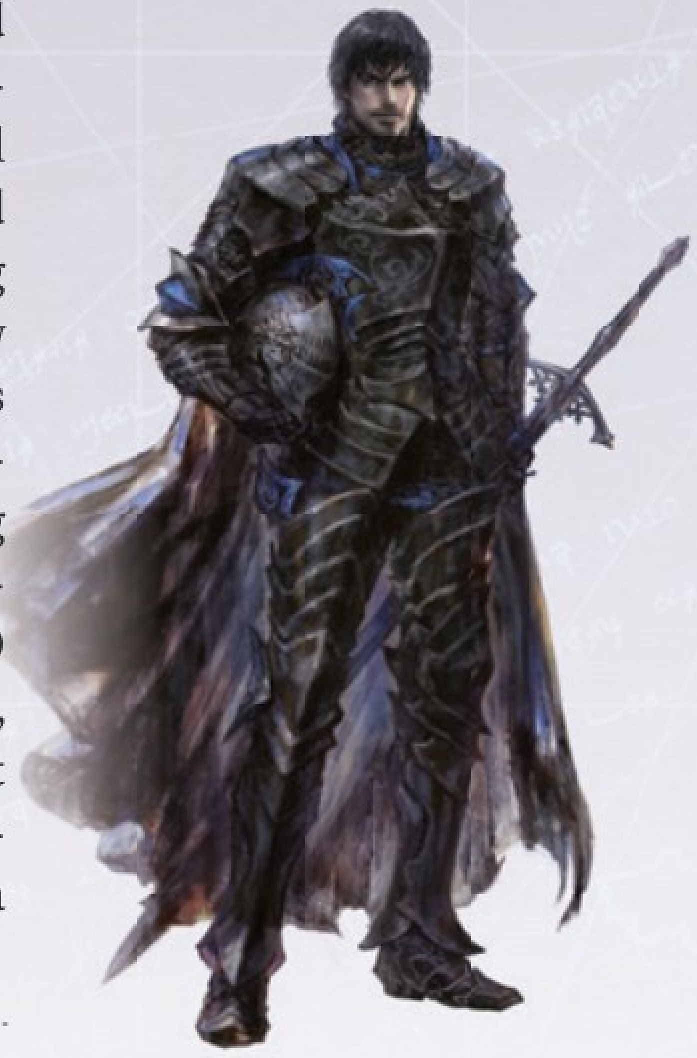
If what I've played, heard across hours of interviews, and seen across trailers and exclusive showings is any indication of the final game, I can see myself wanting more of Valisthea soon after the credits roll.

FFXVI is dark, ambitious, and perhaps most excitingly, something new for the series. It represents a thrilling crossroads for one of the longest-running franchises in all of gaming, embracing fast-paced action combat, a mature tone, and a return to medieval fantasy while encapsulating what makes a Final Fantasy a Final Fantasy: moogles, magic, heart, and hope for a world worth saving. CBUIII is taking huge risks, and we're weeks away from seeing how it all pays off. But this team is confident in what it's created, and I can see why. Watching this studio successfully reboot FFXIV was the first step in gaining the trust of players. Subsequent expansions solidified that CBUIII is one of the most capable MMO developers in the world. Now, in just a few weeks, the studio has the chance to prove it's more than just that, capable of both massively multiplayer and potentially single player success. Of course, as Yoshida says, that will be up to the players this June. ■

For a whole lot more on Final Fantasy XVI, check out GameInformer.com/FFXVI for video interviews, additional features, and more



DION LESAGE
Dominant of Bahamut



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Immortals of Aveum is an impressive magic shooter with Call of Duty credentials

BY KYLE HILLIARD

During 2022's *The Game Awards*, Immortals of Aveum was announced with a teaser trailer arguably leaning too much on teasing. The quick video featured out-of-context voiceovers from unseen characters talking about war while showcasing some kind of gauntlet. Cut to a character, from the first-person perspective, walking through a door and into a battlefield with dragons flying overhead, explosions, and soldiers running with purpose. The character then lifts their arm into the frame to show the gauntlet … and that was it. "We wanted it to be a tease," Immortals' creative director and developer Ascendant Studios co-founder Bret Robbins says. "Ascendant has largely been invisible for the last five years. And that was on purpose. It was really meant just to raise some eyebrows and get people interested." Now, Ascendant has revealed substantially more about Immortals, inviting me to visit its studio to speak with the team and play the game.

The shortest pitch for Immortals of Aveum is Call of Duty, but with magic. It's a pitch any publisher might be eager to embrace and sell, but Ascendant Studios has the bonafides. Robbins worked at Sledgehammer as creative director on Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, Advanced Warfare, and WWII and was co-director of the original Dead Space. "My time on Call of Duty, I got a – I think – pretty good eye for what makes for a thrilling set piece or a great action moment," Robbins says.

In fact, during his time with Call of Duty, Robbins began to imagine the world of Aveum. While working on a typical Call of Duty level, Robbins started to imagine what it would look like if elements like helicopters were swapped for dragons and magic fireballs for rockets. In 2018, with the help of investor Brian Sheth, Robbins struck out on his own and started developing the narrative bible for the universe and game that would eventually become Immortals of Aveum.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** Ascendant Studios **RELEASE** July 20

VISITING THE STUDIO

In 2018, Ascendant Studios quickly went from one employee to 25 with the unfortunate closure of Telltale Games. Ascendant is geographically near Telltale's previous offices in San Rafael, California. When its former employees gathered to commiserate at a nearby bar, Robbins met with a few of them, shared what he had been working on, and pulled in many of those in the unfortunate position of suddenly needing work.

The property now home to Ascendant Studios used to be a bank and retains the original building's vault and its incredibly heavy door. The vault now serves as an office, though the door must remain open in fear of it staying closed if it were to lock shut. Despite being young and not in service for most of its life due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the studio already feels like a showcase for Immortals of Aveum. A big studio logo greets you near the entrance, large, framed pieces of Immortals of Aveum art appear on just about every wall, and the latest trailer – which will be shown during a closed live stream to press in a few hours – is looping on a handful of TVs in the lobby area. Rows of computers line the walls for developers to work on, and upstairs is a large open area used for motion capture.

A closet in the upstairs space is filled with motion capture outfits, and a nearby wall is lined with Nerf-like weapons and padded staffs for acting out combat sequences. Otherwise, the motion capture area looks like any other section of the office. The current state of motion capture technology allows the game's action and performance to generally be captured without needing a proper mo-cap studio. All Ascendant needs is a large open space, but it might not be quite open enough as the ceiling boasts a quarter-sized hole, no doubt the result of an errant stab from an actor that underestimated the ceiling height.

I sit in a nearby conference room to watch the closed live stream presentation, where an expanded trailer is shown and some additional details are shared about the game. In nearby offices, Robbins and other creative staff members broadcast live from their individual offices to share more and take questions from those watching the stream. They answer an important question with prepared confidence here: Immortals of Aveum is a single-player game that will not require an internet connection and will not feature microtransactions.

Once the presentation concludes, Ascendant lets me sit in on its daily all-hands meeting taking place over Zoom. Robbins congratulates the approximately 130 team members on their work leading up to the behind-closed-doors reveal and dives into various departments like the cinematics and gameplay teams. Robbins specifically focuses on the desire and current progress of making sure the game runs at 60 frames per second on every platform. Though he may be taking special care to speak in excessive platitudes knowing a journalist is on the call, everyone seems pleased with the progress and is happy to know there are still months left to polish the game. From there, the meeting turns toward Slack etiquette, unfamiliar jargon about recompilers, and efforts toward "ultra quality." Robbins ends the meeting by saying the light is at the end of the tunnel for development, with the game's July 20 release date not too far off. The whole meeting feels familiar to any number of Zoom meetings attended in my life, but with topics covering framerates, game feel, and performance instead of expense reports.

MARVEL US

An important element of Immortals of Aveum that is difficult to grasp just from trailers, gameplay showcases, and hands-on, is the story. Talking with members of the development team, it was the part of the game they could understandably say the least about, but desperately wanted to. Not only do they not want to spoil the story, but beyond sitting down and watching hours of cutscenes, there is no way to highlight it other than to get reassurances that the team is proud of it. Creative director Bret Robbins quickly pointed out where it is looking for tone and inspiration, saying, "This wasn't going to be Lord of the Rings. I really wanted it to be more relatable, more relevant. So, the cue I really used was looking at Marvel movies."

That cue was embraced by other members of the team, as well. "I think it's impossible for anyone to say they're not influenced by Marvel at this point," senior art director Dave Bogan says. Bogan has a history with Telltale, but also Double Fine. Associate art director Julia Lichtblau (also from Telltale) followed up Bogan's Marvel point, saying, "There is not all the same sort of character with the same backstory and manners of speaking. They're all inherently different, and it does feel a little bit more modern," which is something Ascendant is striving for with Immortals.

I ask about the push for 60 FPS during a later discussion. "I feel like, for fast-paced shooters, 60 is really important." It makes the game feel better and "come alive," according to Robbins. "This also maybe comes a little bit from my Call of Duty background, where hitting 60 was absolutely required. I just think games look and feel better at that frame rate. So, that's what we're gonna have."

JAK AND THE IMMORTALS

In a world where the game Jak and Daxter exists and its sequels are succinctly called Jak II and Jak 3, it's a bold move to name the protagonist of your new intellectual property Jak – same spelling and all. "Well, he wasn't in the title. So I assumed it would be okay," creative director Bret Robbins says. The origins of calling Immortals of Aveum's protagonist Jak is actually quite simple and fully understandable: the character is named after Robbins' son.

CONTROLLING MAGIC

After the tour, presentation, and meeting, I finally play the game. Unsurprisingly, Immortals of Aveum feels a little like Call of Duty, but with magic attacks instead of guns. The game's protagonist, Jak, uses three types of magic, a rare feat in Immortals' world, and the gauntlet, called a Sigil in the fiction, helps him focus it.

The point I play is early in the game, though I am skipped past what I presume would be the game's opening cutscene and straight to a training ground with General Kirkan, played by Gina Torres (*Firefly*, *The Matrix Reloaded*). During my brief time with the game, Torres' Kirkan rose above as an early standout character and accompanying performance. General Kirkan explains the basics of combat while putting up with Jak's over-eagerness to fight and explains details about the three types of magic in the game.

Blue magic is for long-range, sniper-style attacks. Red magic functions like a shotgun and delivers powerful damage at close range. Green magic rests somewhere in the middle, firing a continuous string of magic attacks that track the enemy. Jak also has access to a collection of extra powerful attacks called Furies, limited by a currency picked up on the battlefield. I am surprised to see Furies abilities and health connected to pick-ups found in the world, as opposed to being on a cooldown. "I personally like games that have health pickups and have the ability for you to extend how many health pickups you can carry and how strong your health bar is," Robbins says, also calling it a simple aesthetic choice. "It's a feeling of controlling those resources and doing resource management. Maybe not as much as a survival horror game, but it is important in this game."

Along with magic colors corresponding to the different styles of magical weapons, enemies are also represented by the three different colors and take more damage depending on what you're using. The weaknesses are simple. Red enemies take more damage from red attacks, for example. I am grateful for the simplicity during my hands-on time, as things get hectic quickly.

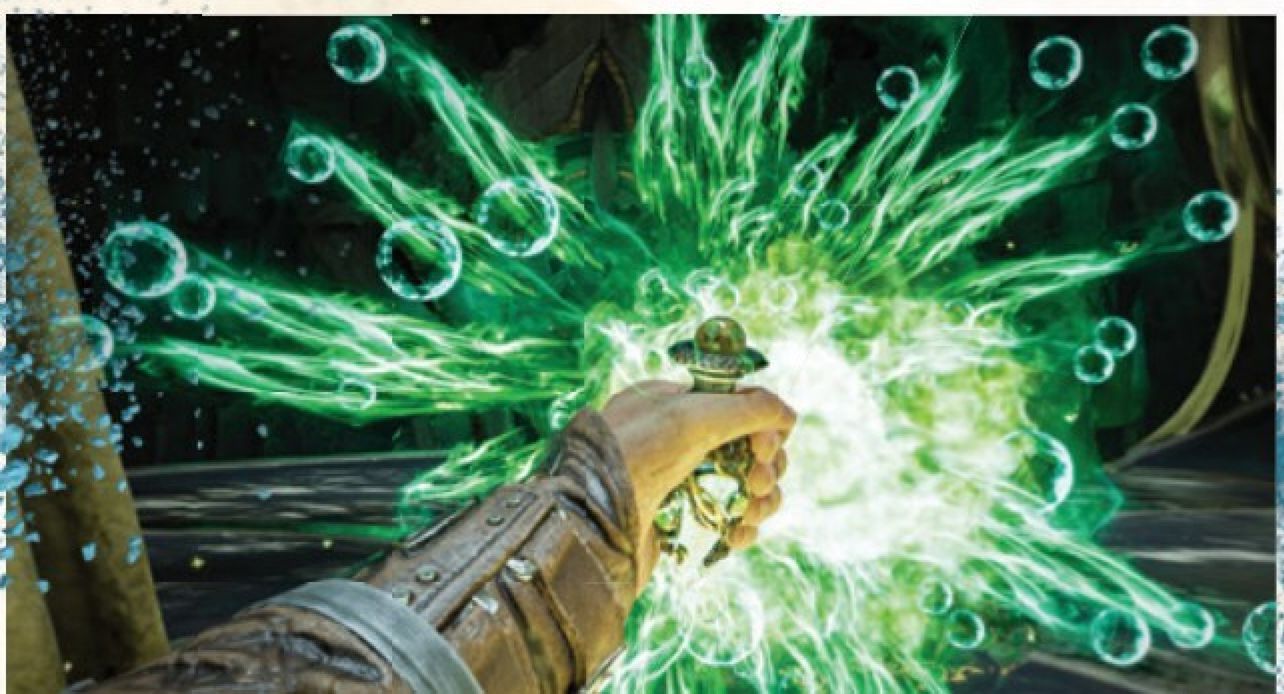
Instinctively, I pull the left trigger to try and aim down sights based on how combat and movement feel. But that trigger activates a Lash ability that lets you pull most enemies closer for a well-timed red magic blast. "Not including [aim down sights] was a big decision. We talked a lot about it," Robbins says. "Ultimately, it came down to the fact that we really wanted the dual hand spell casting where we had left hand and right hand and spell casting, and we want you to be able to use that really easily and fluidly."

After the tutorial, I move into the sequence right after The Game Awards teaser. I am impressed with the smoothness of combat, the speed of switching between magic types, and using the powerful Furies attacks. The Call of Duty style persists as I move from location to location, taking on waves of enemies while orchestrated environmental chaos happens around me. The level concludes with a dragon picking me up in his talons and dropping me in a new, random location. After a brief encounter with some new enemies here, things start to slow down, and I welcome the change of pace.

SPECIALIZING & THE POST-GAME

Immortals of Aveum is a strictly single-player game with a narrative conclusion, but that doesn't mean the game is done when you see credits. Combat designer Jason Warnke did confirm that the game can continue to be played after seeing the end if players want to go find the content they missed or track down the rare Legendary Gear. Immortals is not a loot shooter, though. Don't expect to fight the same instances over and over and hope for the right drop.

Warnke also says the game is designed for players to specialize in their combat style of choice and focus on the magic skill tree they gravitate toward. It is apparently not impossible to fill out the full skill tree for all the magic abilities, but Warnke says it would take a long time. For the typical player focused on finding most of the game's secrets and seeing the full story, Ascendant is predicting about 25 hours of play.



NOT A TYPICAL FANTASY SOUNDTRACK

When you think of fantasy media, the music is generally of a specific genre. Big sweeping melodies and orchestrations that could best be described as lovely permeate fantasy games and movies. Immortals of Aveum, however, sounds much more contemporary. Hip hop beats accentuate combat, while the fantasy orchestrations take a backseat to the driving percussion. “The game is not a straight shot at fantasy. It’s very specific in its own thing. That relates to the approach to music, as well,” executive producer Kevin Boyle says. “We’re using some cinematic orchestral tools that will be familiar, but I think [creative director Bret Robbins] always had an interest in presenting something that’s not quite what you've seen or heard before.”

Alongside the impressive magic shooter gameplay, there are opportunities to explore and solve puzzles. Call of Duty may be a relevant touch point for the action gameplay, but moving around and progressing the story looks to other styles of games. “The architecture is a hub and spoke game. You've got a couple of large, non-linear exploration spaces, and you also have a headquarters, and then you have our more linear cinematic missions that branch off of those,” Robbins says. “An analogy would be something like the more recent God of War games.”

Between shooting, I find doors that need to be opened using different magic attacks and solve a simple puzzle where I move a gigantic statue hand into place to platform across. I also find a few doors where Jak comments that he does not have the ability to open them yet, implying there are opportunities to return in the future.

My gameplay demo ends with a boss fight against a dragon. I sprint around a medium-sized arena dodging fire attacks, mostly leaning on my green attacks to whittle away at its health and a Furies blast that takes out a decent portion when I have the ammo to use it.

Overall, I am impressed with the fluidity and speed of the magic combat. Later at the studio, combat designer Jason Warnke, who worked with Robbins on Call of Duty, shows off the development arena he created to test combat ideas. The gigantic white room features various ramps and levels and a database of enemies and bosses floating in the sky. To test encounters out, Warnke shoots at the enemy database in the sky to summon enemies and try out combinations. Warnke admits that Immortals’ combat has been reconfigured so much that the version of combat we are now seeing is probably the fifth iteration.

A NEW FANTASY WORLD

My time at Ascendant Studios playing Immortals of Aveum inspires confidence. The team has collectively worked on Bioshock, Borderlands, Halo, Call of Duty, and plenty of Telltale games in the past, but other studios have accurately boasted the same resumes with little to show for it. The combination of Ascendant quietly and confidently working on Immortals for the last five years in secret and my hands-on time with the game makes me hopeful.

The remaining question mark is the story. Selling a novel fantasy world filled with new rules and unfamiliar jargon is tough. The narrative is the part of the game I am most interested in learning more about, but the magic combat, only a few months ahead of release, feels strong. ■

Previews

spotlight

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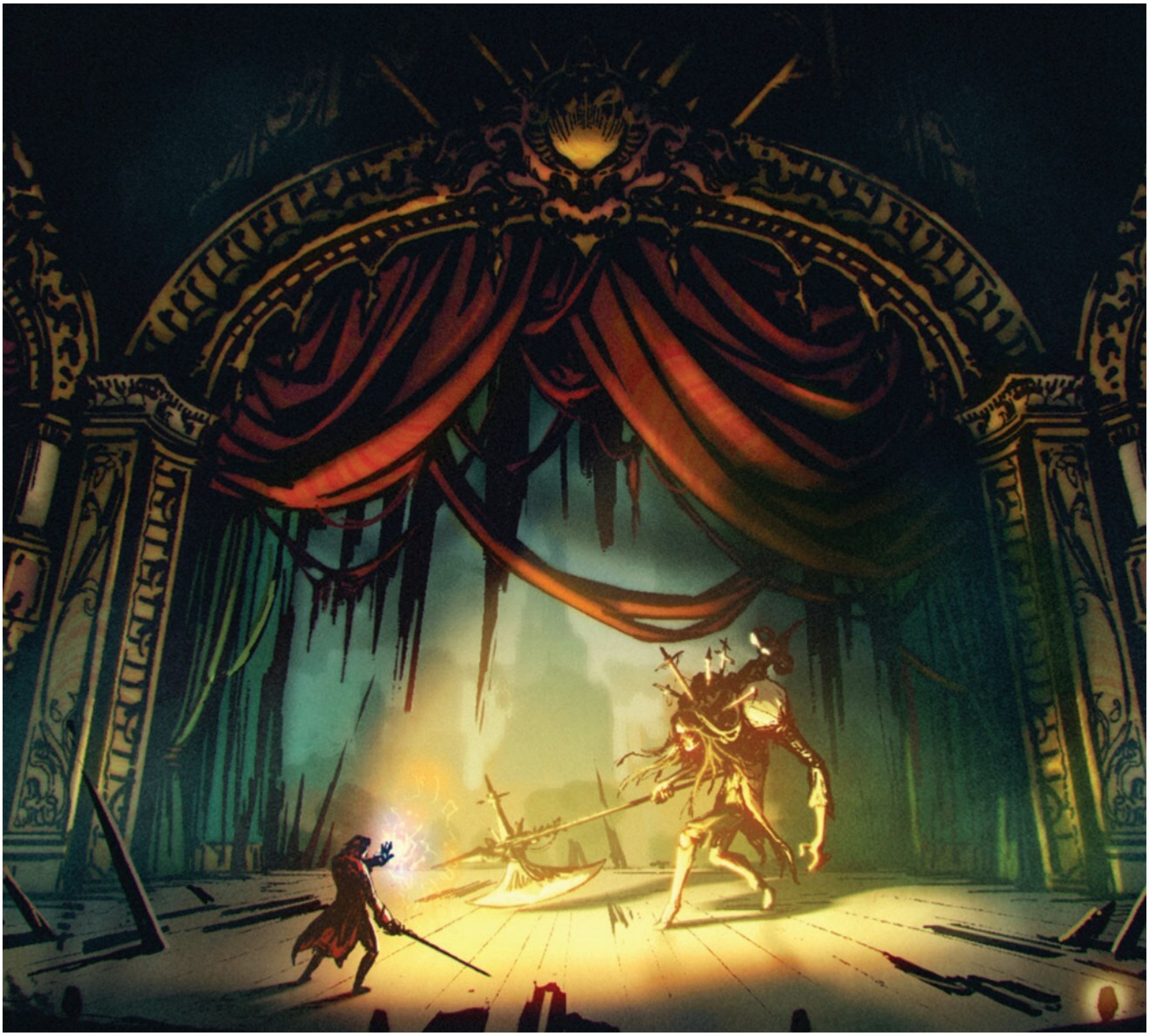
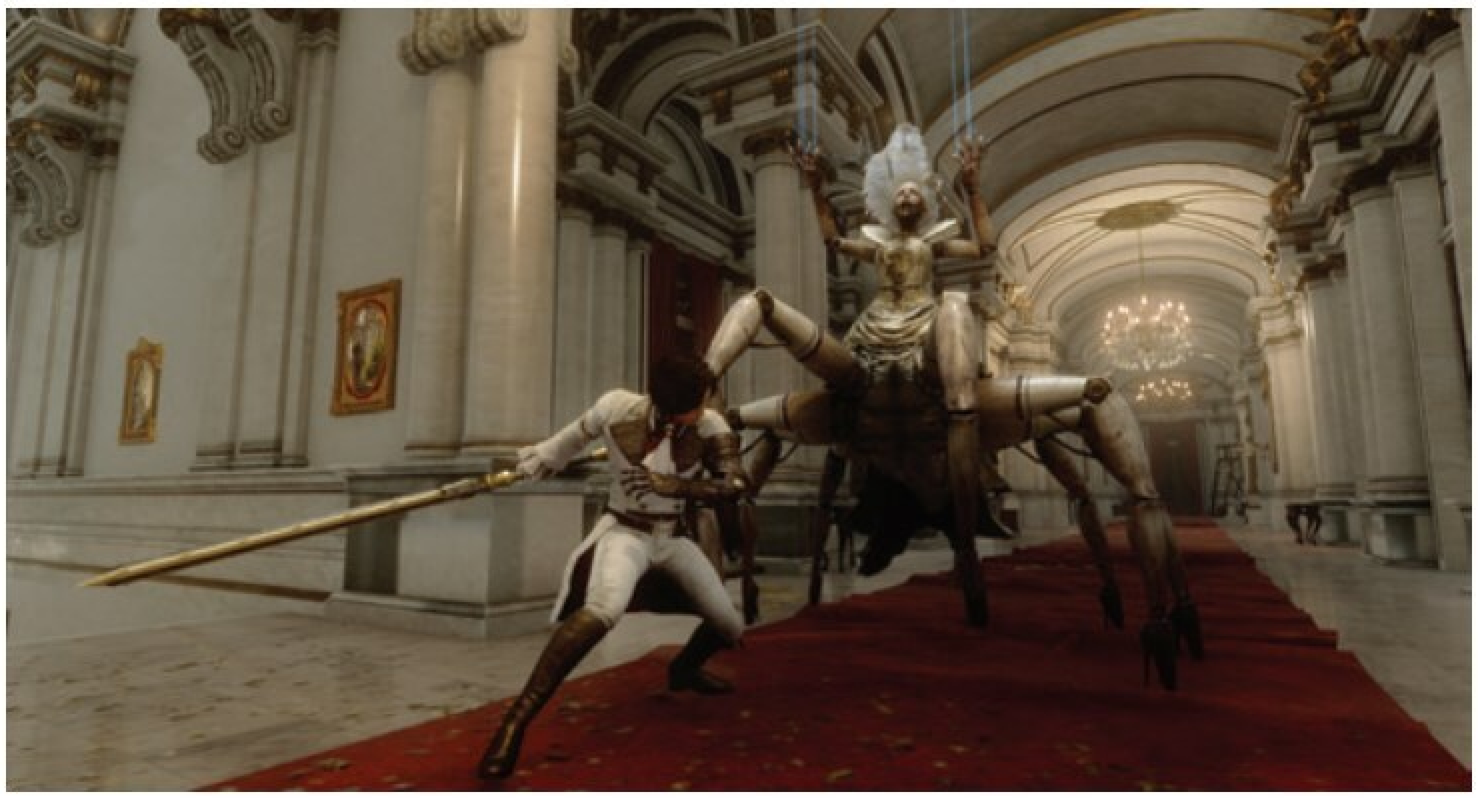


LIES OF P

Puppet master



Lies of P is one of the biggest head-turners on the horizon thanks to its Bloodborne-esque aesthetic and combat on top of its surprising narrative inspiration: Pinocchio. As a decidedly mature version of the living puppet, you battle through a French city infested with monsters in order to, hopefully, become flesh and blood. Our eyebrows raise higher each time we see the game, as do our questions. Thankfully, game director Ji Won Choi helped clear the air on some of our inquiries.

The game's narrative is loosely inspired by *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, Carlo Collodi's 1883 novel that Disney adapted into its hit animated feature decades later. However, Lies of P adheres strictly to the characters and tone of the book, using these elements as the foundation for an otherwise original story. Pinocchio awakens in Krat, a fictional French city, with a mysterious note instructing him to find Mr. Geppetto. Krat has been overrun by supernatural threats for unknown reasons, and Pinocchio must battle his way through to find Geppetto somewhere within Krat's walls.

So why choose Pinocchio of all stories to mold into a brooding, Belle Époque-era action game? According to Choi, the team examined multiple fairytales to find one that matched three criteria: It needed to be impactful, adult-oriented, and memorable. Some may tilt their heads at the idea of Pinocchio winning out over other stories (especially if the Disney film is your only frame of reference), but Choi explains why it's exactly what the developer was looking for.

"It may seem surprising, but if you read the original story of Pinocchio, it is full of dark humor, cruelty, and charming characters," says Choi. "It felt very natural to choose *The Adventures of Pinocchio* as the source material for our project. So far, we think it was the right choice. Additionally, as we have mentioned in our previous trailers, we have a lot of respect for the great writer Carlo Collodi. His work has been a tremendous inspiration for us and has guided us to this point."

Lies of P's deliberately paced combat should feel familiar to fans of Bloodborne, as players take down foes with well-timed strikes while dodging and parrying incoming offense. Choi and his team spent hours playing From Software's 2015 classic and are flattered by the comparisons, but he emphasizes that Lies of P has plenty of distinguishing features that haven't been shown due to the studio's commitment to secrecy.

"Lies of P has its own fun, unique mechanics and combat features, so as the director, it's frustrating to not be able to showcase those aspects as much since we can't reveal everything before the game launches," explains Choi. "As a matter of fact, the gameplay we have planned for release later on will also only represent a small portion of Lies of P, so we hope our fans understand and look forward to discovering how much the game has to offer."

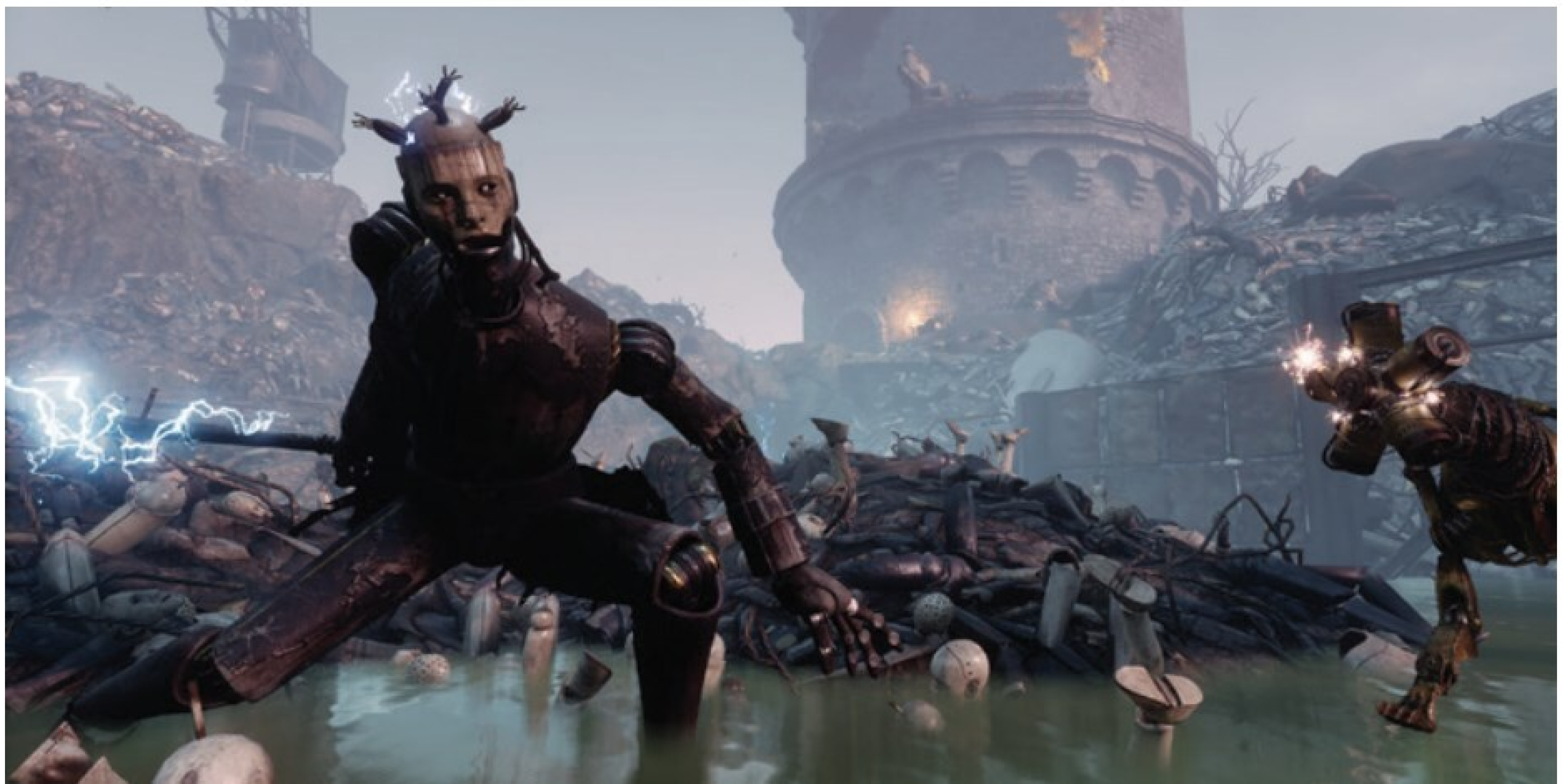
One feature that helps set the game apart is Pinocchio's interchangeable mechanical limbs, called Legion Arms. Each bears its own unique ability. One fires a barrage of electric bolts, another spews flames, and another acts as a hand cannon. This lends itself to the various builds players can create. For example, a feature called Weapon Assemble lets players combine various blades and handles to create armaments catering to their play style. Combining these weapons with your already customizable Legion Arms opens a potential wealth of arsenal combinations. Seems like you'll need all the help you can get because Choi confidently teases that everything we've seen in Krat only represents a small slice of the dangers that await players beyond these walls.

Another big aspect of Lies of P's gameplay plays into Pinchoccio's most famous habit: lying. The game presents multiple choice-driven scenarios in which players can choose to be dishonest with characters. These decisions not only determine which of the three main endings you get, but the choices also affect gameplay elements and the individual fates of the personalities you encounter. Again, Choi is careful not to reveal too much more than this, only hinting that players will need to think "extremely hard" about what they say to other characters.

Lies of P is Neowiz's first foray into a subgenre filled with imitators that, more often than not, fail to hit the mark as well as From Software. The premise has our curiosity; we only hope the action seizes our attention, as well.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Neowiz
DEVELOPER Neowiz **RELEASE** August



STREET FIGHTER 6

Like a dragon punch

Street Fighter 6 may feature thrilling 1v1 fights, but one of its most exciting features is its World Tour story mode. The single-player sandbox is a dramatic shift in what the series has offered, and players recently got to sample a small slice in a recent demo. On a trip to Capcom's U.S. headquarters in San Francisco, I ventured beyond the demo for a more comprehensive look at what World Tour and other destinations offer.

World Tour gives players robust tools to craft a custom fighter, then take them to the streets of Metro City on a journey to build them into a world warrior. Upon starting my adventure, I'm tickled by World Tour's almost Like a Dragon-esque absurdity. Nearly every citizen, be it an office worker, school student, or even a shop vendor, can be challenged to fights (which the game seamlessly transitions to without load screens) to gain XP and other rewards. Other times, I was targeted by silly hoodlums such as the Mad Gear Gang from Final Fight, and I picked fights with Roomba-like robots and other non-human combatants. World Tour doesn't take itself seriously, which is one of its best qualities.

Getting better involves becoming a student of the main characters. I began my journey under Luke's tutelage, which allowed me to adopt his moveset, including special attacks. Later, I pledged my services to Chun-Li, letting me use her Kikoken and Spinning Bird Kick. Studying under new masters gives you more movesets to mix and match, and your proficiency increases as you use them.

Additionally, a character's signature move can be used in exploration outside of battle. I utilized Spinning Bird Kick to shatter obstacles like barrels, crates, and signs to clear paths and uncover hidden areas. Competing missions for your teacher raises your bond with them, and over time, you'll learn more of their personal stories. You can also bring them gifts, which are purchased from vendors alongside consumables such as health and stat-boosting items you can use during fights.

Outside of World Tour, I explored Fighting Ground, where versus mode resides. I had access to the entire 18-fighter roster, letting me get hands-on with new faces like JP. This cane-wielding businessman quickly became a favorite with his ability to control the playing field by placing portals to leap through or detonate like bombs. Additionally, long-range attacks, such as magic spikes that erupt beneath players, make him great for keeping opponents at bay. I also enjoyed Lily, a young member of T. Hawk's Thunderfoot Tribe, who utilizes dual ball-headed war clubs to unleash powerful, wind-based assaults.

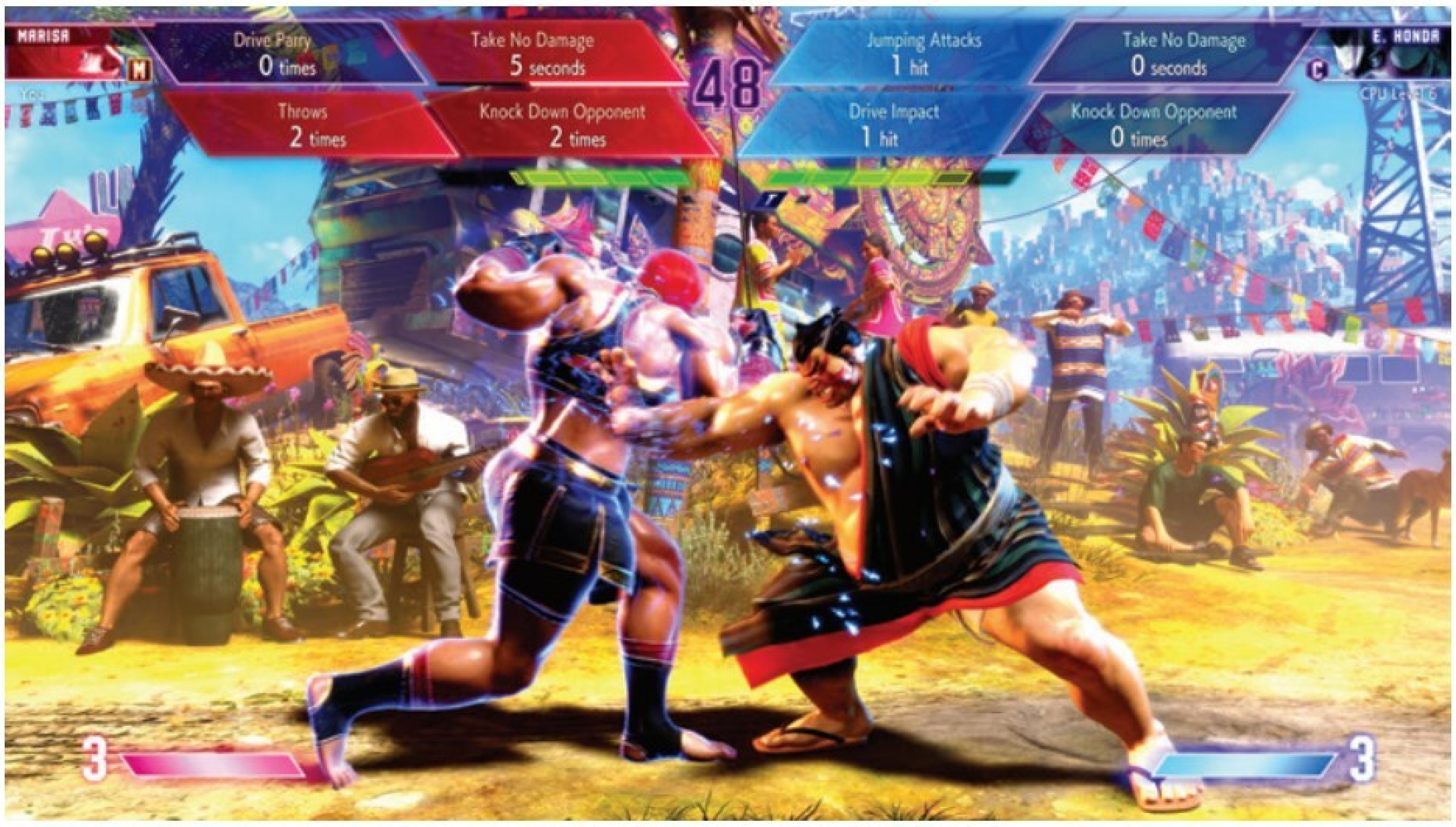
In addition to 1v1 and Team Battles, I tried out Extreme Battle, which spices up combat with modifiers and stipulations such as dodging charging bulls or knocking falling, exploding Servbots from Mega Man Legends into each other. My favorite combines both players' life bars into a tug-of-war type battle where you must nail hits to push your portion of the bar to the other end for the win.

I'm also impressed by the number of onboarding features for newcomers, rusty players, or those wanting to master the game's nuances. The simplified inputs from the Modern and Dynamic control schemes rock, but I especially love the Character Guide, which walks you through the moveset and strategies of a single fighter. Multiple training options for mastering frames, reversals, and other fighting pillars should help turn good players into championship contenders.

Street Fighter 6 is shaping up to be one heck of a package and may be the most feature-dense entry yet. After enjoying its first public demo, we can't wait to finally prove our mettle when the game launches on June 2. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

See new Street Fighter 6 gameplay at YouTube.com/GameInformer

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom
RELEASE June 2


MARISA
Drive Parry 0 times
Take No Damage 5 seconds
Throws 2 times
Knock Down Opponent 2 times
48
Jumping Attacks 1 hit
Take No Damage 0 seconds
Drive Impact 1 hit
Knock Down Opponent 0 times
E. HONDA
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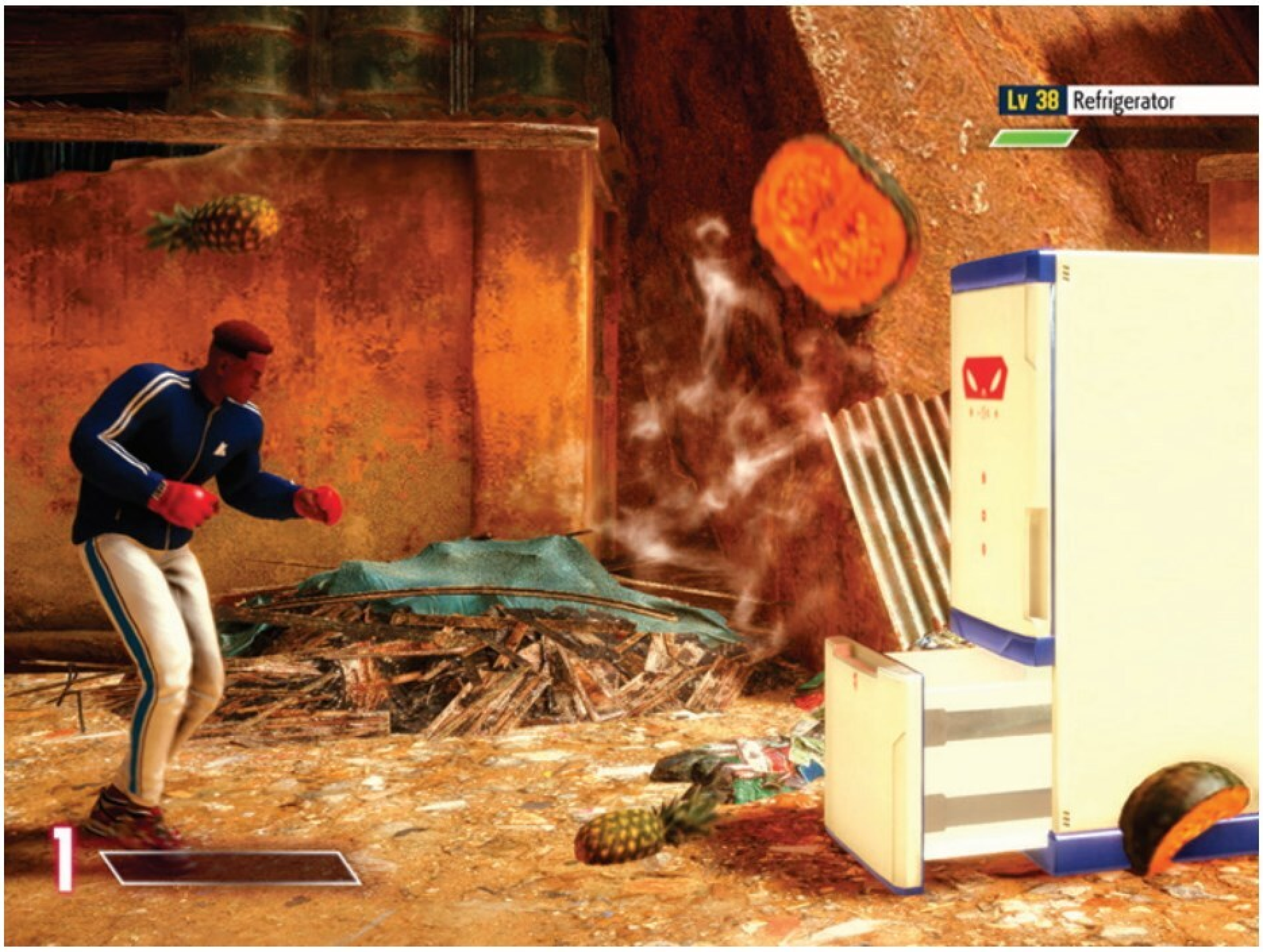
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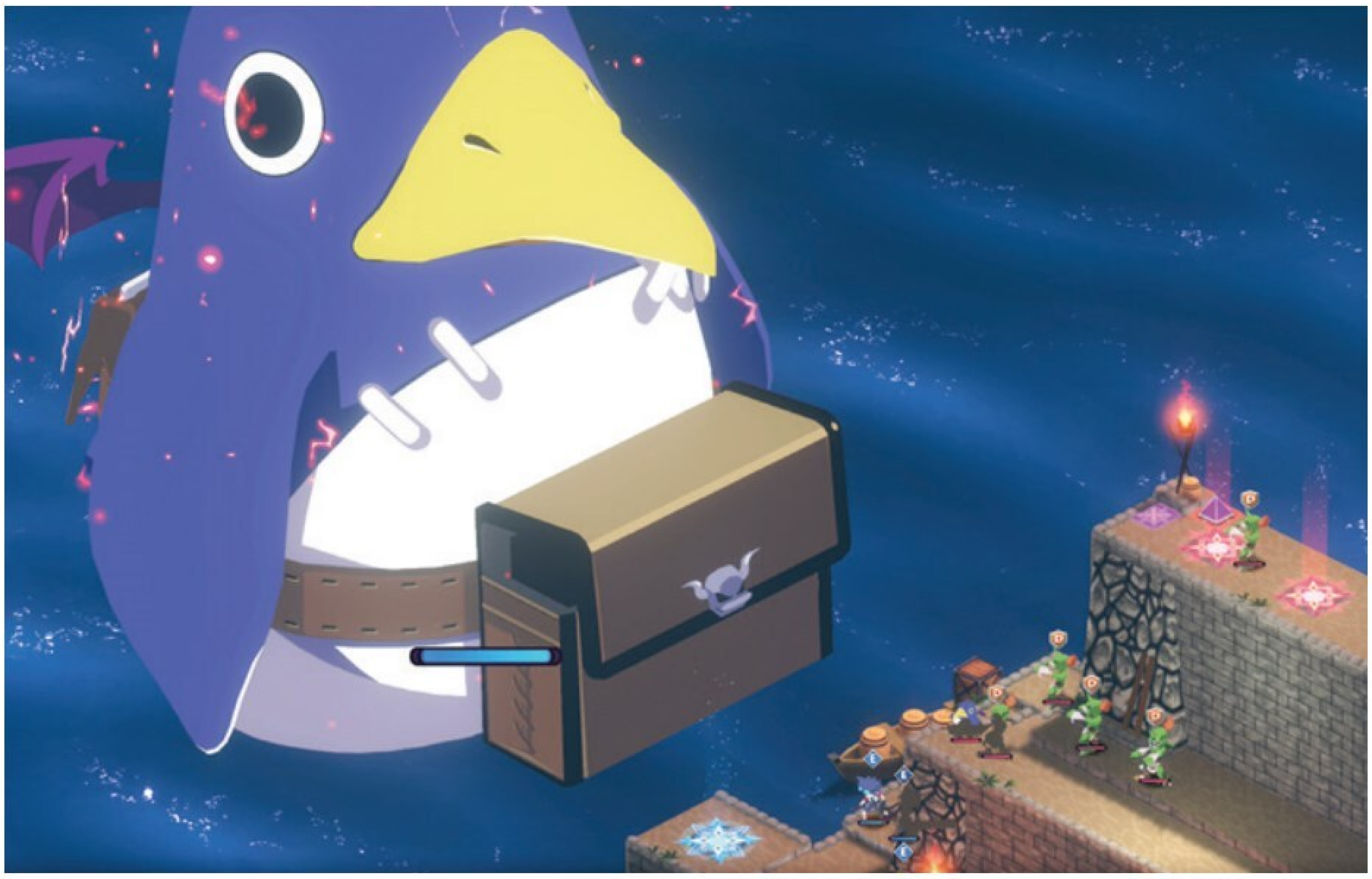
DISGAEA 7: VOWS OF THE VIRTUELESS

Towering tactics



Twenty years ago, Disgaea: Hour of Darkness was released on the PlayStation 2, marking the series' debut. Today, the strategy role-playing franchise is still going strong, and developer Nippon Ichi is celebrating its two-decade milestone by releasing its latest mainline entry, Disgaea 7: Vows of the Virtueless. In our interview with director Shunsuke Minowa, he says this new game was created with that anniversary specifically in mind. By combining classic Disgaea features, like absurd level caps and weapon skills, with newer elements, like 3D models and the Jumbification mechanic, Disgaea 7 is Nippon Ichi's attempt to fuse the new and the old.

Disgaea 6 was an experimental entry. The art style made the jump to 3D, which required Nippon Ichi to reduce the number of characters. And in order to streamline the process of grinding for levels, battles were simplified and automated, which Minowa says "ended up also reducing much of the traditional fun to be had from completing an SRPG [Strategy Role-Playing Game]." Disgaea 7's development team is adjusting both of these approaches to better align with games of the past. Auto-battling is still present, but a cost has been added to limit its use. And now that the studio has more experience with the 3D aesthetic, Nippon Ichi is including twice the characters, along with some new battle mechanics.

The series is perhaps best known for its supersized combat system – characters can reach levels as high as 9,999 in most games – and Vows of the Virtueless takes that scale to a whole new level with the Jumbification system. When certain conditions are met, characters grow to massive proportions and stand outside the battlefield, allowing them to ignore standard movement rules and attack anywhere while also afflicting the map with character-specific effects.

Minowa explains that the new mechanic was actually created because of the new 3D art style that the series recently adopted. "Jumbification was born from a conversation with a designer," he says. "I wanted to reduce the challenges of character movement and also wanted a function that would affect the entire map. The designer suggested that since the models are 3D, even if we made the characters huge, they would still look good, so we decided to give it a try. After further thought, we realized that if we displayed [the Jumbified] character on the map, this would get in the player's way, so we settled on displaying the character outside the map."

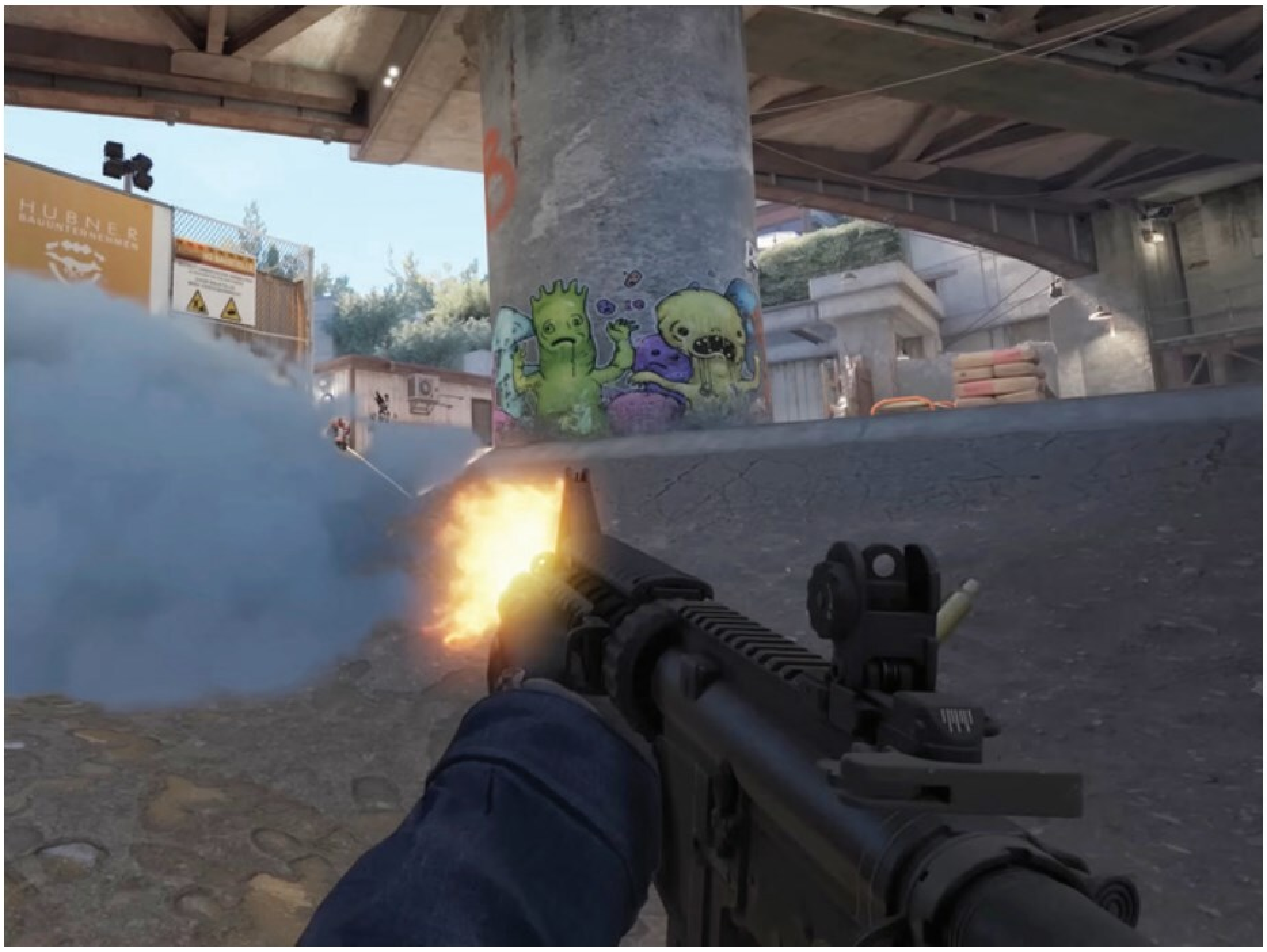
Images of Disgaea's penguin-like prinnies growing to the size of kaiju are hilarious and fit the series' track record of goofy, over-the-top stories and characters. Disgaea 7's story sounds like it's set to be par for the course. The adventure takes place in the Japanese-style Netherworlds of Hinomoto, a land where bushido, the samurai code of honor, has been done away with. In a twist of fate, the selfish warrior Fuji partners with obsessive fangirl Pirilika on a quest to obtain legendary weapons and overthrow Hinomoto's corrupt government. According to Minowa, "The plot has also been hailed as a classic Disgaea story in Japan," where the game is already in players' hands.

This idea of "classic Disgaea" is clearly a guiding star for Nippon Ichi. As a part of the interview, we asked Minowa if Disgaea has been influenced by other strategy RPGs, and while he has played them, he claims they haven't influenced the development process. Instead, he says, "We saw [Disgaea 7] as the culmination of the Disgaea series so far, so in that sense, the Disgaea series itself has been the most influential factor."

Disgaea 6 was a game that strove to take risks for the sake of modernization, but Disgaea 7 is an attempt to reconcile those risks to more closely align with the series' identity. For a game meant to celebrate two decades of legacy, that feels like a solid move.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER NIS America **DEVELOPER** Nippon Ichi **RELEASE** Fall 2023



COUNTER-STRIKE 2

Striking back

Counter-Strike 2 is more than just a free update to Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO) – developer Valve is calling it "the largest technical leap forward in Counter-Strike's history." From what we've seen of the game so far, this definitely seems like the case. Using Valve's Source 2 engine, Counter-Strike 2 provides a visual overhaul to decade-old maps, refining the game's online capabilities and using technical improvements to reimagine classic gameplay. While the full game won't be out until this summer, the upgrades Valve has shown so far are impressive.

Counter-Strike 2's new smoke physics are a perfect example of how Source 2's tech impacts the series. Smoke grenades now create dynamic, interactive clouds that react to the environment. The clouds generally behave more realistically, wrapping around objects, filling spaces, and reacting to environmental light, but there are huge gameplay ramifications as well. Smoke clouds in Counter-Strike 2 respond to bullets, carving pockets of visibility when fired through. High-explosive grenades have a similar effect, clearing away huge chunks of smoke in a single explosion. In a gameplay trailer, Valve showed some uses in context, like tracing gunfire back through smoke to spot an enemy or using a grenade to clear your line of sight to snipe someone from afar.

Counter-Strike 2 is also moving past its reliance on tick rate. For those unfamiliar, CS:GO divides time into small, regular intervals called "ticks." When you jump, move, or fire your gun, the game processes that act on the tick it occurs nearest to. While it's likely not something players would often experience, narrowly missing a tick can cause your actions to happen at a slight delay since the game assigns that action to the following tick. For example, shooting milliseconds after the tick you were aiming for might cause that action to be assigned to the next tick and miss. In Counter-Strike 2, this isn't something players have to worry about anymore; ticks are no longer linked to moving or shooting, making the game even more precise than before.

The last major upgrade involves Counter-Strike 2's maps. Valve sorts each new map into one of three categories: Overhauls, Upgrades, and Touchstones. Overhauls, like Overpass, have been fully rebuilt from the ground up. Judging by images on the official Counter-Strike 2 website, the layout is largely unchanged, but textures and models have been completely remade and updated. It's new, yet familiar. Upgraded maps, like Nuke, use the Source 2 engine's new lighting systems, as well as some textural upgrades. Finally, Touchstone maps, like Dust II, are largely unchanged from their appearance in CS:GO. Across the board, maps are brighter and easier to read. Valve also plans to release tools for the Source 2 Engine, meaning fans can create their own maps and make them look as good as they do in the base game.

While the changes above are the biggest improvements coming to Counter-Strike 2, Valve has made lots of minor improvements, as well. Blood splatters have been updated, causing bullet wounds to spray in accurate directions based on where the bullets were shot from. Fires and explosions look better as well, and you can even see liquid realistically sloshing around inside of a Molotov cocktail.

And if you're worried about losing your precious weapon skins, don't be; all weapon finishes, stickers, and other CS:GO inventory items will be available to use in Counter-Strike 2, and they'll look better than ever, thanks to Source 2 lighting and material tools. Stock weapons have also been upgraded with higher resolution models.

At the time of writing, Counter-Strike 2 is currently in its Limited Test phase, but everyone else will be able to play when the game launches worldwide this summer.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Valve **DEVELOPER** Valve
RELEASE Summer

XDEFIANT

Crossfire crossover

In a landscape where many major shooters have adopted the free-to-play model, entering a new IP into the ring is difficult. Titans like Fortnite and Apex Legends don't just have large, dedicated audiences – their respective development teams have spent years refining gameplay in response to player feedback. Competing in the space is an intimidating task, but amazingly, after playing two hours of Ubisoft's XDefiant, I'm optimistic it might have a chance.

XDefiant is a first-person shooter putting players in the shoes of gunmen from Ubisoft's flagship franchises, like Far Cry and Splinter Cell. If you're skeptical, I don't blame you – I was, too. I hadn't played every franchise in this crossover, and even if I had, the most important part of a shooter is how it feels. Now that I've played it myself, I can confidently say it feels fantastic. While it's not an exact one-to-one, the closest-feeling game I can compare XDefiant to is Call of Duty. Kills are quick, and combat emphasizes your positioning rather than your movement abilities: reaction time is key. Because of that, I wasn't surprised when I learned that two-time Call of Duty World Champion Patrick "Aches" Price had spent the last year and a half working as XDefiant's systems designer. He told Game Informer about transitioning from competitive play to a full-time game developer.

"I got reached out to, just as a gameplay consulting role, and that's kind of where I started here," Price says. "I fell in love with the game." A few months after being brought on to consult, he moved into a full-time system designer position, working on XDefiant's "three C's:" character, camera, and controls.

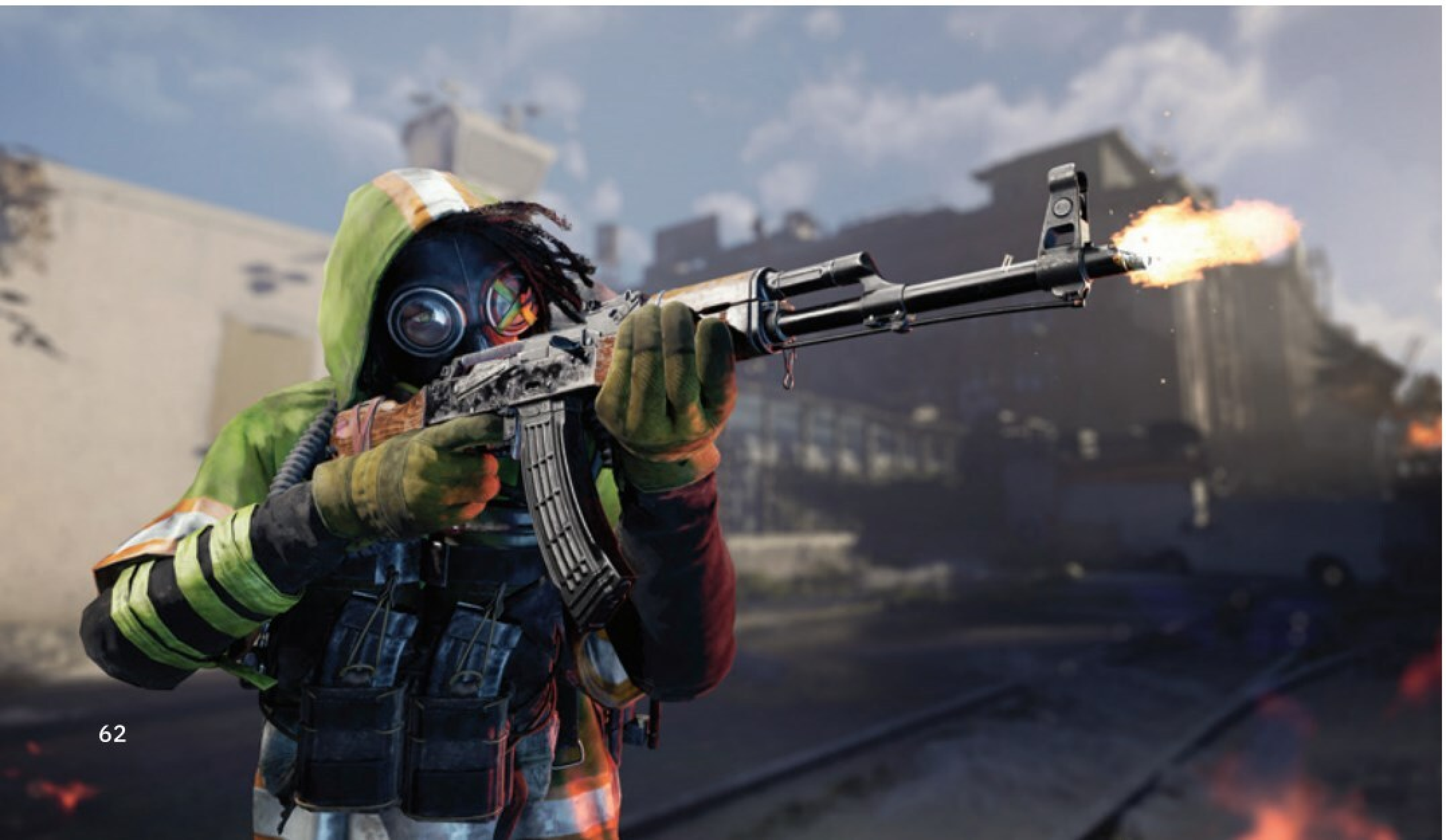
XDefiant is far from a COD clone, however, thanks to its factions system. You'll start every match by choosing whom you want to play as: Echelon (Splinter Cell), Libertad (Far Cry 6), Cleaners (The Division), Phantoms (Ghost Recon), or Dedsec (Watch Dogs). These factions act as character classes you select at the start of your matches, and there are no limitations on how many of each faction can exist on each team, but most teams tend to have a healthy mix. Weapon load-outs are entirely separate choices, so you can play as whichever character with any weapons you prefer. You can even change factions mid-game.

Mechanically, each faction facilitates a different type of player. For example, I spent most games playing as an agent of Echelon, the government agency from the Splinter Cell series. I picked them first because I liked the aesthetic, but quickly found their toolset complimented my play style. Since they're a covert intelligence agency, Echelon agents have a passive ability that keeps them off enemy minimaps and activated abilities that allow them to turn invisible or ping enemies through walls. Since I typically like to flank the enemy team with a shotgun to catch them by surprise, these abilities were immensely helpful. Using invisibility to ambush or escape foes is satisfying, but a limited use window and a 30-second cooldown timer keep it balanced.

If you prefer to charge your enemies head-on, Libertad freedom fighters can heal allies and extend their own health pool. If you want to play defensively, Phantoms conjure forcefields and bash enemies with a riot shield. And if you want to control an area with fire and shoot incendiary rounds, Cleaners are for you – they're also Price's current favorite. Personally, I didn't vibe with the other factions as much as I did Echelon, but players of all factions killed me at a relatively even rate, so I think it has more to do with personal preference than class design. I also couldn't play as Dedsec during this preview, but they'll be available during the upcoming closed beta.

Matches take place at one of 14 locations from the games' histories, like Ghost Recon's Attica Heights or Watch Dogs 2's Nudleplex. As far as I could tell, there isn't any in-world explanation of this, and I'd argue there shouldn't be: it's a sort of silly crossover meant to celebrate Ubisoft's games library. While I'm sure I'll pick out favorites as I spend more time with the game, the map design is solid across the board, somehow feeling both fresh and nostalgic. In fact, it was the first thing that stood out to Price when he was first brought on the team.

"I played a wide range of shooters, obviously predominantly Call of Duty," Price says. "I was competing for about a decade and [...]



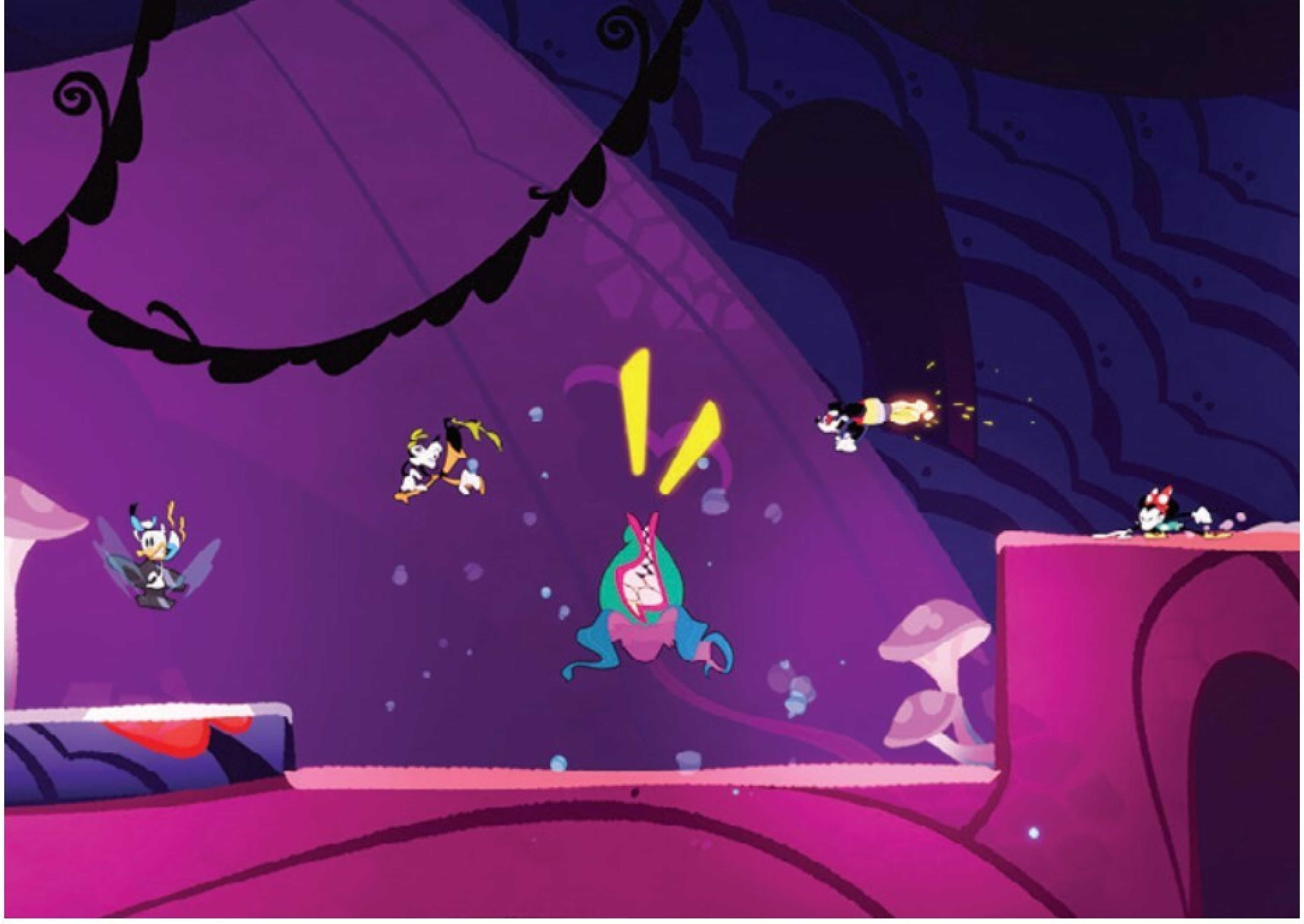
seeing [map] evolution over time. It kind of hit on the nostalgia of what I missed from those [earlier] types of maps."

We played five modes. Hot Shot, Domination, and Occupy were arena modes, taking place in traditional three-lane maps. Meanwhile, Escort and Zone Control are more linear modes, with maps that focus players onto a single, continuous path. My personal favorite was Hot Shot, a spin on Kill Confirmed where the player with the most points gets a boost to fire rate and movement speed but is highlighted on enemy screens as the titular Hot Shot. Being stuck in a multiplayer lobby where one player dominates all the others is always frustrating, and Hot Shot's design seems to balance that in an engaging way.

Hot Shot is a great example of how Price views XDefiant's design ethos: its goal is not to redefine what a shooter is meant to be but to harken back to gameplay that brought people to the genre in the first place. "New Age shooters are innovating a ton and trying to do new things," Price says. "And for us, a core pillar is bringing back the fun of traditional 6v6 multiplayer. A lot of our players are saying, 'Hey, this was something we might not have known we miss so much.'"

Whether or not XDefiant makes an impact at launch remains to be seen, but the tight arcade shooter at its core indicates a promising future. Although I only played for a few hours, I'm officially hooked, and I can't wait to go back for more. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 12-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft
RELEASE TBA



DISNEY ILLUSION ISLAND

Mickey Metroid

Disney Illusion Island has turned heads by recalling the recent excellent animated Mickey Mouse shorts from Disney and co-op platformers like Rayman Origins and Legends. "The Rayman games are definitely in the pool. The modern ones. We love them," developer Dlala Studios' CEO and creative director AJ Grand-Scrutton says. The main video game inspiration for Illusion Island, however, comes from Mickey Mouse's interactive history. "It's kind of an homage, I think, is the best way to put it. We always kind of viewed this as our spiritual successor in our minds," Grand-Scrutton says when asked about the game's relationship to the Mickey Illusion games of the past.

Games like Rayman and the Disney games like Mickey Mania, Castle of Illusion, and Magical Quest all feature platforming, but one of the biggest surprises from seeing more of the game and speaking with the development team happened in a flash while watching the game: a large overview map. I only saw it for a moment while the game was paused, but Disney Illusion Island is not broken into levels. Instead, there is a larger, interconnected map. "I think it'd be silly to shy away from the reality that, structurally, we're super influenced by Metroidvania," Grand-Scrutton says.

Players will be able to explore, open fast-travel points to go back to already-visited sections, and new abilities will unlock new areas as you progress. Grand-Scrutton is careful not to fully commit the game to that genre, however, saying, "I think a big difference is Metroidvania is quite combat focused, whereas our main focus here is platforming."

Seeing the game in action does not betray that goal. Disney Illusion Island does not feature combat, at least not in the traditional sense. I watched a member of Dlala Studios play as Minnie, and though they did encounter enemies in the world and even participate in a boss fight, there was no punching or jumping on heads. Instead, Minnie avoided a rampaging creature, and for the boss fight against a screen-filling plant, she completed platforming challenges to progress through the stages of the battle to eventually claim victory. "From the start, the joy of movement was important to us. And at the same time – and this is a super fluffy, creative-director kind of answer for you – but Mickey and friends didn't necessarily scream combat to me," Grand-Scrutton says.

For Dlala, having Mickey, Minnie, Donald, and Goofy (the four playable characters in the game) beat up other enemies just felt wrong. "It didn't really fit the vibe of the characters for us," Grand-Scrutton says, and it led to the team asking some questions: who was asking for combat, and who would even be forcing the addition? Not Disney, as the parent company and publisher is supportive of the direction.

Unfortunately, I could not put my hands on a controller, so the question of how the game feels – crucial for platformers – remains unanswered, but I was impressed by what I saw. I watched Minnie ride air currents and leap in ways that reminded me of platformers I have enjoyed in the past. It looks challenging, as well. Without the need to pause and beat up a few bad guys, Minnie never stopped moving between platforming challenges. I am eager to play the game to make sure the platforming feels as smooth as it looks, but until then, I will be busy calling dibs on which character I want to play when it releases this summer.

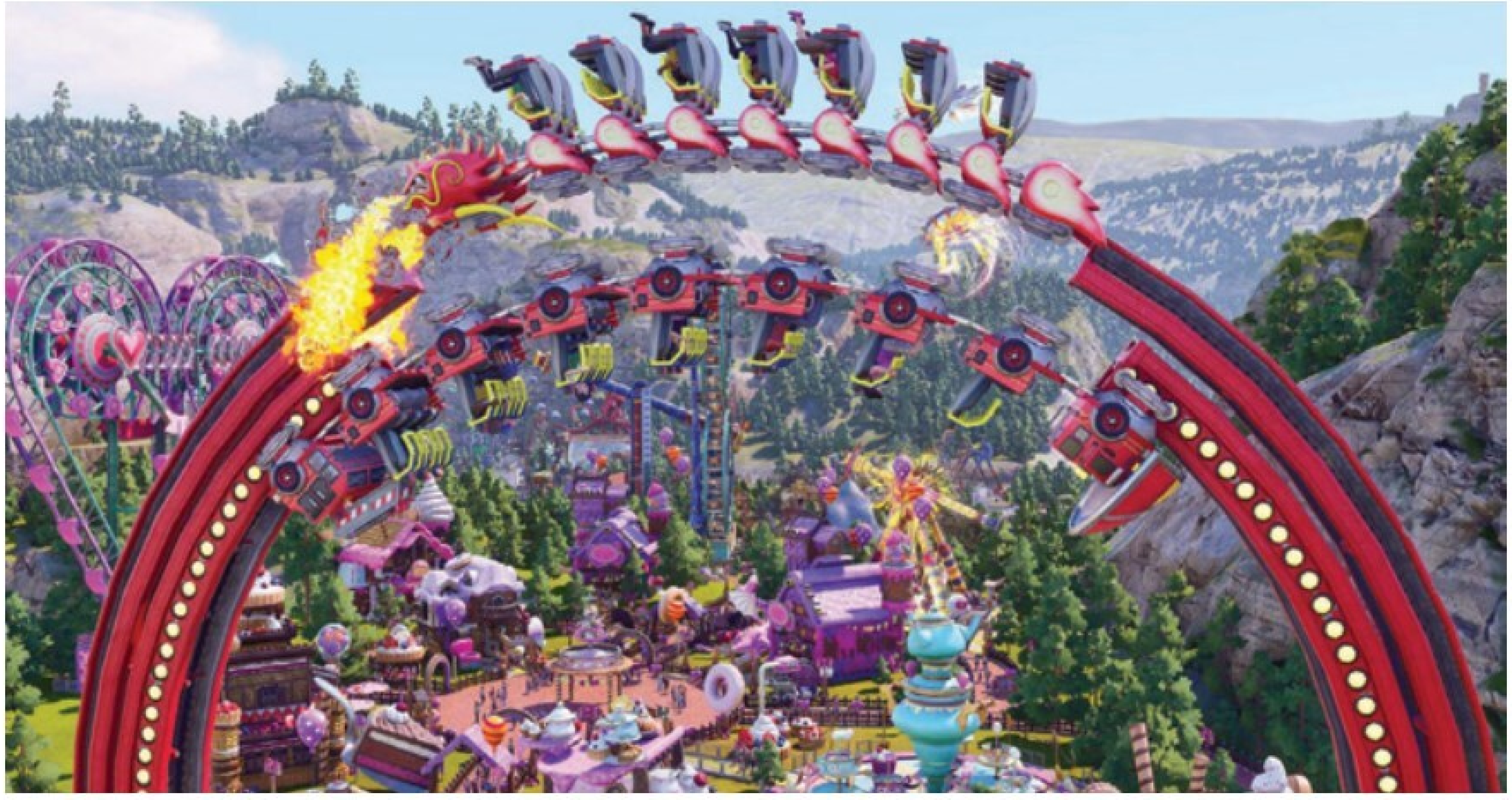
The correct answer is Donald Duck, of course. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

Read an unabridged interview with creative director AJ Grand-Scrutton about Disney Illusion Island at GameInformer.com

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Platforming **PUBLISHER** Disney Interactive
DEVELOPER Dlala Studios **RELEASE** July 28

PARK BEYOND

Looping back around



Since RollerCoaster Tycoon's first games revolutionized the theme-park builder genre, various franchises (including RCT) have attempted to recapture that magic, but few have gotten close. Park Beyond, the latest from Tropico 6 developer Limbic Entertainment, gives players the keys to the amusement park of their dreams.

In Park Beyond, you can build attractions that laugh in the face of the laws of physics. On one coaster, I added a jump, and for another, I attached a cannon that blasts the cart over a gap. You can also take your coasters off the rails – literally – by letting the carts leave the track and ride across the ground or water. You can even construct impossibly long tracks that give parkgoers a high-speed tour of your entire park. Despite this focus on over-the-top elements, you still need to ensure your track is physically sound; I can't tell you how many times a cart flew off the track because I made a high-speed curve too sharp.

You can engage with Park Beyond in the story-driven campaign mode, where you interact with bombastic personalities and make branching decisions that affect your goals. For example, in an early mission, they asked me whom I wanted to appeal to with my park. When I select teenagers, that means my success is based on how well I cater to their desires – time for high-speed thrill rides, adrenaline-fueled coasters, and myriad energy-drink stands.

The campaign does a good job onboarding you with the various gameplay systems and mechanics, and when you feel ready, you can jump into the sandbox mode. Here, you can build to your heart's content or attack custom goals or budget constraints (or just turn on infinite money and go at it).

Theme-park builders have long been a favorite genre of mine, and while I'll likely always yearn for the simplicity of games like the original RollerCoaster Tycoon, Park Beyond has my attention. Its mix of super solid park-management mechanics and gravity-defying fantastical elements makes this the most exciting theme-park game in many years. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Limbic Entertainment **RELEASE** June 16

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AFTER US

Humanity has ravaged Earth, leaving it a lifeless husk. As Gaia, the spirit of life, you must restore life by reviving the souls of extinct animals. Every step, jump, and dash helps cleanse the barren landscapes of pollution, and After Us eschews the grim aesthetic of the post-apocalyptic genre with its surreal, dreamlike imagery. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Private Division **DEVELOPER** Piccolo **RELEASE** May 23

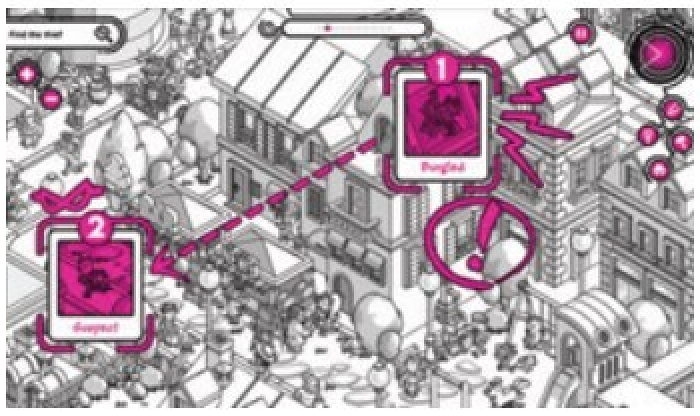
RIFT OF THE NECRODANCER

In this spin-off of Crypt of the Necrodancer, series protagonist Cadence must repair magical, musical rifts that are tearing her life apart. This title replaces the series' traditional gameplay with a slew of new musical modes. From a Guitar Hero-style riff mode to Rhythm Heaven-style minigames to Punch Out-style boss battles, Rift of the Necrodancer is a charming take on the roguelike world Brace Yourself Games is known for. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

10/10
PERFECT
130980
COMBO 13x

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Music/Rhythm **PUBLISHER** Brace Yourself Games **DEVELOPER** Brace Yourself Games **RELEASE** 2023

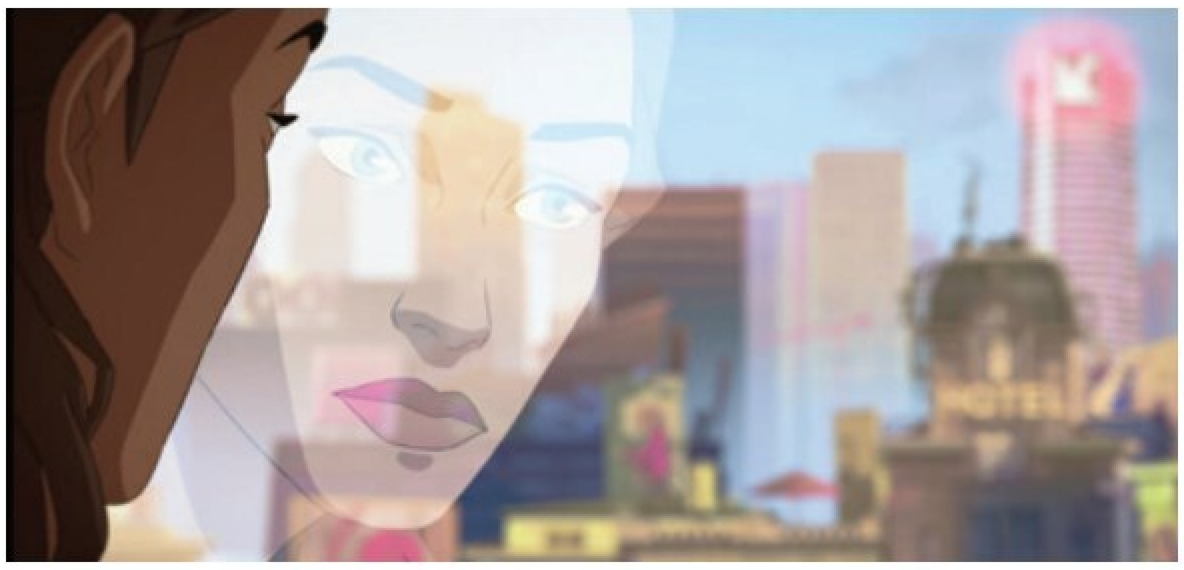
CRIME O'CLOCK



This point-and-click puzzle game puts you in the shoes of a time cop investigating a string of interconnected crimes across different historical periods. A dastardly force is tampering with time, and stopping them involves exploring sprawling, ever-changing maps across five eras to uncover clues, collect evidence, and make deductions to nail the culprit. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Just For Games **DEVELOPER** Bad Seed **RELEASE** June 30

HARMONY: THE FALL OF REVERIE



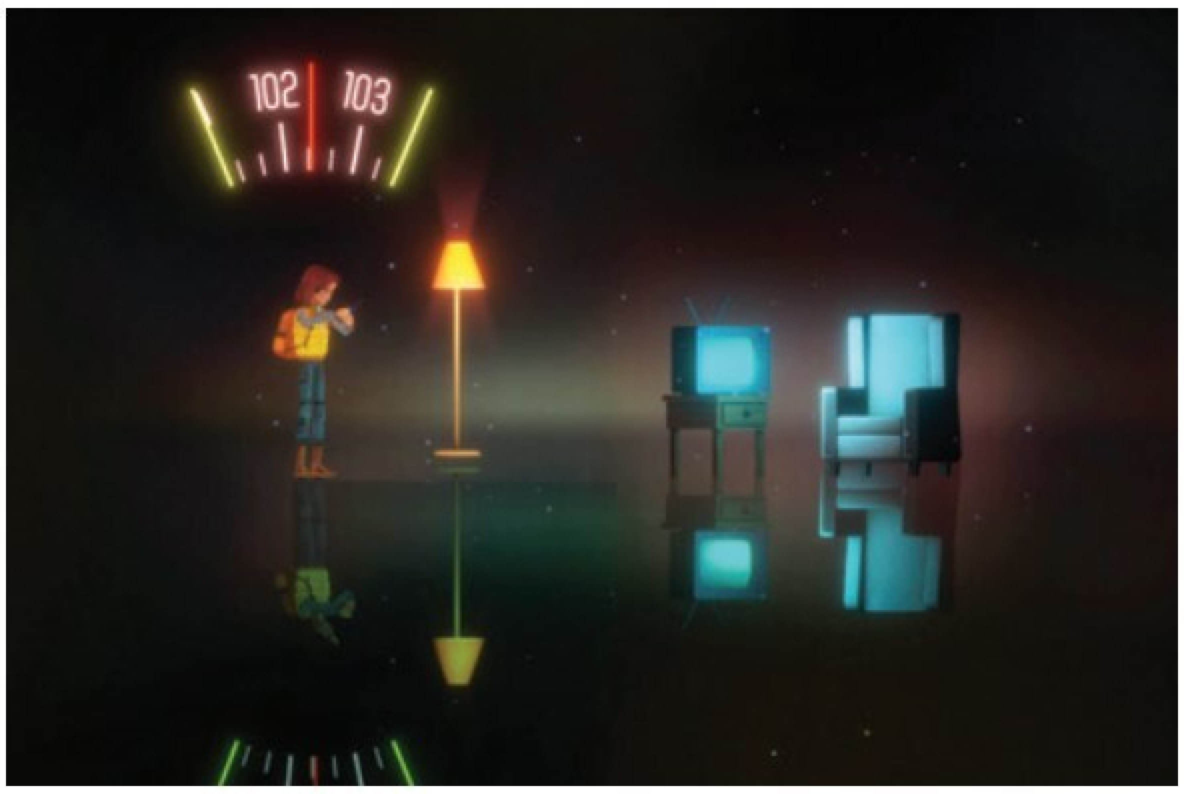
Don't Nod has made a name for itself with choice-driven adventure games like Life is Strange, but Harmony represents its first foray into the visual novel genre. The game follows a woman named Polly who falls into another dimension while looking for her missing mother. Animation is limited, but beautiful, and the story and all its narrative choices are charted from the beginning in a very straightforward way. We only played the opening chapters, but it already feels like the kind of game you will want to revisit after seeing your first ending. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Don't Nod **DEVELOPER** Don't Nod **RELEASE** June 8 (Switch, PC), June 22 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S)

OXENFREE II: LOST SIGNALS

Picking up five years after the first game, Oxenfree II follows Riley Poverly, an environmental researcher who stumbles upon a mysterious radio frequency. She and her friends chase this lead to the haunted Edwards Island, unleashing a slew of supernatural phenomena involving a mysterious cult. Hopefully, they left the boat running. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

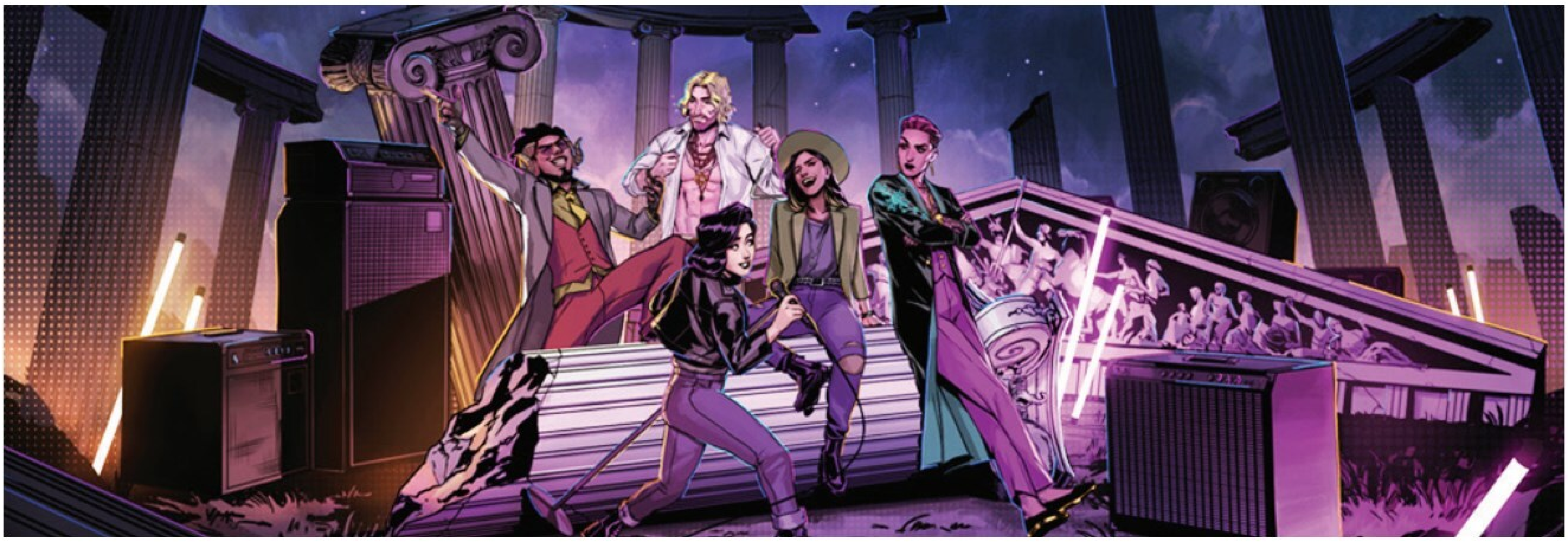
PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Netflix **DEVELOPER** Night School Studio **RELEASE** July 12



STRAY GODS: THE ROLEPLAYING MUSICAL

Stray Gods: The Roleplaying Musical is Hades meets *Hadestown*. After being accused of murdering The Last Muse, Grace has three days to convince the Greek myth-inspired cast of characters of her innocence. With music by Austin Wintory (Journey, The Pathless) and a star-studded cast that includes Laura Bailey, Troy Baker, and Mary Elizabeth McGlynn, Stray Gods has us eagerly awaiting opening night this August. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Humble Games
DEVELOPER Summerfall Studios **RELEASE** August 3



BLASPHEMOUS II

In Blasphemous II, you'll follow The Penitent One once more through the nightmarish land of Cvstodia in his fight against The Miracle. This game aims to remain faithful to the original's challenging combat and life or death platforming, but comes with new abilities, progression systems, custom builds, and more. The story picks up from the end of the first game's DLC, so you'll want to play through that before Blasphemous II launches sometime this summer. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Team17
DEVELOPER The Game Kitchen **RELEASE** Summer

SUPER MEGA BASEBALL 4

The Super Mega Baseball series returns in June, but this time with some major enhancements. Following Following Metalhead Studios' acquisition by Electronic Arts, the arcade-style baseball game is injecting more than 200 legends of the sport into its roster of recognizable characters. Add to that a new deckbuilding-inspired draft, increased customization, and several visual and audio upgrades, and Super Mega Baseball's cleanup-spot entry is swinging for the fences. **BY BRIAN SHEA** ■

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** EA Sports
DEVELOPER Metalhead Studio **RELEASE** June 2

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GI MUST PLAY

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

Such great heights

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom is battling impossible expectations. The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild represented a radical and successful reinvention of The Legend of Zelda – a series considered by many to be the apex of game design. Despite its numerous changes to Zelda's formula, Breath of the Wild was a massive success and its legacy only grows stronger with time.

To give Breath of the Wild a direct sequel is a dangerous prospect. The resulting game lacks the admittedly difficult-to-recreate, undeniable impact of the prior game. Instead, it gives players a chance to revisit the world through a completely new lens with new abilities for a brilliant adventure providing players a staggering amount of agency in how they approach nearly every gameplay instance.

Tears of the Kingdom mostly takes place on the ground in Breath of the Wild's Hyrule, but it doesn't feel like a retread. New traversal options that change how you explore the world combine with the passage of time to make this Hyrule different, like visiting the town you grew up in after being away for many years. That balance of novel and familiar on the ground is well-executed, and the islands in the sky create wholly new, substantial areas to explore. Figuring out how to leap from island to island in the sky is consistently thrilling, and exploring Hyrule's caves is dark and intimidating, creating potent exploration options to suit your mood.

Link's new abilities are the main draw of Tears of the Kingdom and the king of the abilities is Ultrahand. The simplified pitch is it allows Link to connect objects. I was intimidated by the new mechanic when it was introduced, and the controls do take some getting used to, but it did not take long for me to become Hyrule's number one combination contractor and engineer, and I relished the title.

Combining objects to solve simple puzzles to creating complicated flying contraptions with a series of fans, rockets, and batteries is a delight without ever making you spend too much time on any one project. Tears of the Kingdom recognizes what you are trying to make in nearly every instance, which means simple acts like attaching a steering wheel to a platform with four tires works with little fuss. But it also accounts for much more complicated builds, and I was frequently surprised at what I could quickly create and implement into puzzle solving.

Ultrahand is the rare mechanic that sneaks into your brain and makes you contemplate it while outside of the game. The highest compliment I can give is that I dreamed about Ultrahand, rotating pillars and attaching them to boxes in my sleeping brain the same way I saw orange and blue circles in my dreams when I first played Portal. It is Tears of the Kingdom's most significant achievement.

The adventure is full of other highlights, as well. The story begins with an engaging conceit and only builds to an excellent conclusion. It also doesn't repeat a big narrative issue of the first game: Where was Zelda the whole time? Thankfully, the story knows it's a sequel and acknowledges what came before. You can check in on characters and locations of the past to see how they've changed. The story does not step too far out of the bounds of what we've come to expect from a Zelda plot, but I liked the turns it took, and I was eager to see where it was going.

Structurally, Tears of the Kingdom is familiar with combat working functionally the same. New Shrines that are fun to solve and reward fast-travel locations litter the map, and the new dungeons are simplified but don't sacrifice puzzle design despite being easier to understand. The new dungeons also have great bosses. I appreciated that they are more varied and allow you to lean on recently learned, specific abilities to claim victory.

Video game sequels are often iterative on what came before them. It looks a little better, plays a little smoother, retains important mechanics while introducing new ones, and continues the story. Tears of the Kingdom checks most of these boxes, but getting rid of the Runes from the first game and giving players new ones to use in exploring a familiar but undeniably new world is ingenious. Nearly every encounter, whether puzzle, traversal, or combat, must be reconsidered. It makes you think in new ways. I didn't get the same goosebumps exploring Hyrule as I did in the past, but I did experience new emotions both on a granular level from solving individual puzzles and on a larger scale by going back to one of my favorite video game locations. They say you can never go home again, but I adored returning to Hyrule with all new tools.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

For more Tears of the Kingdom details and impressions, check out The Game Informer Show and All Things Nintendo podcasts

9.75

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** May 12 **RATING** E10+

STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

Capturing the fantasy

GI
MUST PLAY

If the only thought in your mind upon completing 2019's Jedi: Fallen Order was that you wanted more, then I have excellent news. Picking up where its predecessor left off, Jedi: Survivor isn't just more of the same but more of virtually everything, with meaningful advances and improvements across the board. It's a longer game with greater levels of customization, more enemies, more diverse approaches to combat and puzzles, and more storytelling and character development for its compelling cast of characters. While some structural and story choices start to wear thin, Jedi: Survivor is nonetheless a step up in almost all the ways that matter. It also manages to capture a lot of the tonal and thematic ideas that work about this fiction, helping cement its place as one of the best in the long history of Star Wars games.

As we rejoin Cal Kestis, there's little of the step back in power that some action game sequels attempt. He's a full-fledged Jedi Knight, with all the Force powers and lightsaber tricks you worked so hard to earn last time still in place. Robust onboarding quickly gets into the action and story, making you feel powerful and capable. The flexibility of playstyle expands from there, with new saber stances and equipment that provide choice in confronting the galaxy's dangers. The downside is that most upgrades to Cal's use of the Force feel more like twists and tweaks rather than wholly new powers, but it's a small price to pay for well-paced action from beginning to end.

Combat and dueling are excellent, demanding a Jedi's patience for defense to master. It's impressive to balance battle encounters across a big game like this so that they remain challenging at every step, but Cal's new adventure manages to do so. A wide variety of formidable foes await, each demanding observation and canny button work. A few late-game bosses rely on frustrating cheap tricks, but they always make for climactic and affecting encounters.

I adore the mobility and navigation challenges, which nail that sense of controlling a Force-attuned hero leaping and swinging through seemingly impossible paths. Like the combat, a satisfying upward slope of complexity keeps traversal engaging throughout – no small feat in a game this big. Several scattered optional puzzles are also fiendishly clever, and I enjoyed them as a departure from the action.

While Jedi: Survivor includes several unique planets to visit, it grounds the experience in a single frontier world called Koboh, with more than a little Old West inspiration. Large swaths of the game unfold in the different corners of this semi-open world planet, filled with rumors to track down, bounties to hunt, and secrets to uncover. I like the locale, but by the end, I was growing tired of running in circles to the same destination after so many prior visits. Thankfully, whether on Koboh or visiting planets like Coruscant or Jedha, a new fast travel system makes navigation between meditation points easy.

Customization is foundational across the game and its reward systems, from tweaking hairstyles, jackets, and saber colors to character perks and powers. That extends to increased ownership over the world, through the ability to enhance a cantina with a garden, an aquarium, new visitors, and even musical tracks. I felt invested in the adventure and the improvements I found along the way.

Across its lengthy campaign, Jedi: Survivor takes an initially meandering course to find its plotline but eventually coalesces into a story about disparate people searching for a safe home. The moment-to-moment character interactions and dialogue help elevate the lack of focus, with some sweeping melodrama in the best traditions of Star Wars fiction. The distinctions between love and attachment, and the dangers of both, often lurk in the background of Star Wars stories. Those themes take centerstage this time, with memorable and rewarding results.

Developer Respawn Entertainment clearly took a measured and thoughtful approach to analyze what worked and what didn't in its last Star Wars game, and Jedi: Survivor feels like a worthy attempt at evolution. It captures the magic of Star Wars as well as anything in the current canon, and it's a stellar adventure in its own right. Still, nailing the fantasy of being a Jedi? Doesn't hurt. **BY MATT MILLER**

9.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** Respawn Entertainment
RELEASE April 28 **RATING** T

MLB THE SHOW 23

Loading the bases

Each year, developers of annualized sports franchises work to craft new experiences to try and avoid the community criticism that each successive release is "just a roster update." While real-life sports don't evolve much year over year, developers still need to provide players with reasons to come back each time, whether that be gameplay improvements, enhanced modes, or better visuals. MLB The Show 23 does all of that while also exploring a unique avenue – history – to great effect.

On the field, MLB The Show 23 plays as well as any entry to date. Whether stepping up to the plate at a critical moment with runners on, taking the mound in a tense bases-loaded situation, or simply chasing down a routine flyball, gameplay is smooth and often gorgeous thanks to new animations.

On the gameplay side, new quirks further differentiate the superstars and role-players, and various improvements to fielding (like a tweaked throwing meter) make for more skill-based play. Of course, if anything isn't to your liking, you can change things around in the extensive settings list. The list is daunting, but the Options Explorer that launches when you first fire up the game helps you get things close to ideal in an efficient manner.

Perhaps the centerpiece of this year's new offerings is an excellent new Storylines mode highlighting The Negro Leagues. Featuring eight players, these chapters offer documentary-style talking-head clips before giving you control of icons from the era of racial segregation. I loved learning more about and playing as some of the greatest players and most influential figures in the history of baseball.

The bite-sized gameplay challenges are often simple enough to complete, but the reward of unlocking the next history lesson had me excited to see the last goal checked off my list. Too often, sports games are fixated on the present and future of the sport, but MLB The Show 23 shows that looking back to the past is a rewarding avenue for developers to explore, especially when it's about such an important but often-overlooked chapter in baseball's history.

In past years, the player-lock mode Road to the Show, where you develop a created player over several years, has been my favorite. However, the maturation of March to October, which started as a story-driven single-season mode, has led to it taking that title. The mode has grown substantially since its introduction in 2019, now offering scouting, trade logic, and plenty more while still only having you play the crucial moments of each season. Franchise mode offers you much more flexibility, breadth, and depth, but March to October tailors the experience to not only your performance but your team's starting point, giving you a more dynamic and efficient experience.

MLB The Show 23 offers so many different modes with which you can engage. From the card-collecting team-builder Diamond Dynasty to the history-rewriting Moments mode, you can step on the field from the angle of your choosing.

The action of MLB The Show 23 is superb, but the occasional technical or logic hiccup breaks immersion on a semi-regular basis. From checked swings clearly crossing the plate and being called safe (and vice-versa) to fielders not covering bases in certain situations and the computer-controlled runners completely misunderstanding the tag-up rules, unnecessary frustration reared its ugly head every few games.

Real-life Major League Baseball continues to evolve in ways to encourage faster play in hopes of appealing to a broader audience, but MLB The Show 23 feels somehow ahead of the game. At the same time, the new Storylines mode shows the past is just as important as the future, providing players with the best of both worlds. Myriad options and modes allow you to engage with America's Pastime precisely how you want, and in the process, MLB The Show 23 delivers one of the best baseball games in years. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Sports (8-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Sony San Diego Studio **RELEASE** March 28 **RATING** E

REDFALL

A life-draining trip to New England

Redfall is my biggest disappointment of 2023. As a massive fan of developer Arkane Studios' previous work, from Dishonored through Deathloop, my expectations were high for the company's new release. However, this vampire-hunting first-person shooter is messy, plagued with technical flaws and head-scratching design decisions counterintuitive to the game itself. The result is an often-bland experience, made frustrating by occasional glimpses of potential, and it's sucked the life out of me.

The fictional harbor town of Redfall, Massachusetts, is overrun with vampires and their cultic worshippers. Your goal as one of four unique protagonists is to restore the haunted region to its former state. Standing in your way are the Vampire Gods, a wealthy group of scientists-turned-monsters whose backstories never impacted me despite the campaign's surface-level attempts. That's about as much as the introduction gives you before throwing you into the action.

After completing Redfall's introduction, you conduct story and side missions from a centralized base of operations. The first few hours of the narrative follow The Hollow Man, a mysterious entity proselytizing from the town's radio signals. The Hollow Man seems to have been everywhere you go, and his presence is unnerving. This stretch features Redfall's best missions and locations, which require you to explore a dilapidated mansion and its gruesome past, fight a powerful enemy at a cliffside lighthouse in a lightning storm, and rescue hostages from a boatyard The Hollow Man's followers control. Unfortunately, the game tries to replicate its early hours throughout its remainder; hard-to-follow story revelations, repeating side activities, and a second, less-interesting map leave it feeling hollow and formulaic. Lastly, Arkane presents the Vampire Gods' storyline via flashbacks in which you stand in an abandoned space watching vaguely humanoid ghosts speak to each other. The result is largely forgettable.

On a positive note, I like the four launch protagonists: Remi and her robotic companion Bribón; a teleporting cryptozoologist named Devinder; Jacob, a marksman with a psychic eye; and Layla, a biomedical engineer who inherited telekinetic powers after a medical trial gone wrong. Each character has unique skills you can upgrade via a straightforward-but-sufficient skill tree, but with only three total abilities per character, you won't use them nearly as much as your firearms. The experience could've been more interesting if I could pick and choose from the game's 12 abilities to carve my playstyle, but sadly you must select one character and their pre-determined skillset for the entire game.

Redfall's shooting mechanics and armory of weapons are serviceable, with the heavy-hitting stake launcher and ultra-violet raygun – which petrifies vampires – being the highlights. You'll discover new weapons as you explore the world and complete missions, each slotting somewhere into the rudimentary tiered-loot system. Despite guns having randomized perks, like increased damage to petrified vampires, I didn't pay much attention to them because the loot system recycles the same dozen or so weapons repeatedly, with slightly higher stats each time. Notably, it does the same with enemy vampire types, too. I'd often repeatedly fight the same type of vampire, but my character would remark that it was a new vampire simply because it had a different name.

Looking at the world of Redfall, I become sad by its wasted potential. For every great location, there are a handful of forgettable ones. The result is an empty-feeling game with several puzzling problems, like a lack of proper stealth takedowns, a tedious quest and waypoint system, and the inability to pause gameplay in single-player mode. Rampant technical issues hinder brighter moments, including frequent server crashes during multiplayer, inputs failing to work, broken animations, and numerous other bugs that make playing Redfall a frustrating experience. For a game about fighting the undead, Redfall feels soulless in all the wrong ways. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

5

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER Arkane Studios
RELEASE May 2 **RATING** M

DEAD ISLAND 2

A good weekend getaway to LA

Dambuster Studios is the third team to work on Dead Island 2 since its 2014 reveal. It used this opportunity to create its own version, and the final game is a worthwhile follow-up, especially for fans of the original 2011 release. Dead Island 2 isn't breaking new ground narratively, but a good hook moves you through the game's various Los Angeles districts. The stars of the show are the zombies and the gory customizable action that happens because of them. I rolled credits most excited about the carnage my tour through LA brought me. I only wish I was as enamored with the rest of the game.

After a quick cutscene set up this idealized take on Los Angeles and how it's become a dead island of sorts, I selected Amy, an agility-based character. While each of the six slayers has a different personality and backstory alongside two exclusive innate abilities, I finished Dead Island 2 feeling like whom I played mattered little narratively. Storylines, barks, and lines felt generic enough that I wasn't concerned I was missing part of the larger narrative by not playing through the game as each survivor.

Unlockable skill cards offer more of that variance I wanted. With 15 equipable slots, I decked Amy out to play a lot like the zombies I was fighting, utilizing their moves against them. The cards are easy to understand and fun to collect.

The story of Dead Island 2 takes Amy through many of the locations you'd hope to visit in Los Angeles, from Beverly Hills to movie studio lots and more. It's not an engrossing story, but it's serviceable. It's also nicely paced, rarely overstaying its welcome and letting me return to the action right when I start to miss it. But ultimately, it's not a story that will stay with me, even if the team is setting up more adventures with this cast.

Each location is lovingly designed, almost as if you were getting the greatest hits of each locale, perfect for the bloody tourist romp through Los Angeles that Dead Island 2 ends up being. The extreme gore remained shocking throughout my nearly 20 hours, although I wish the more in-depth action had arrived much sooner.

I loved how I could customize different weapons to inflict more damage on the undead. Weapons vary in rarity, and rarer weapons allow for more customization with mods and perks. Adding fire, electricity, and other elements to my weapons lent itself well to the immersive sim-like nature present in much of Dead Island 2's world, as did throwable "curveballs" like chemical bombs and zombie-luring bait.

Dambuster Studios uses these elements to create short and sweet puzzles to reach loot and collectibles, and most of my post-campaign enjoyment came from these. Side quests, much like the main quests, shined when they moved at a brisk pace, but most are just fine. Combat is most fun in short bursts when taking down a handful of zombies. But some setpieces throw dozens at you, and combat becomes a wave-based chore.

At the core of this game is zombie destruction, and Dead Island 2 features plenty of systems with which to engage and plenty of zombies to destroy. Its serviceable story does just enough to move slayers across Los Angeles' postcard locations at a brisk pace, and I appreciate how much side content is available within them to keep each visit entertaining. This game won't stay with me long, but I'm not sure it was meant to. With Dead Island 2, Dambuster Studios asks little of the player – only that you enjoy a good excuse to kill zombies in increasingly gory ways for a weekend or two – and in doing so, delivers on the promise of what this series is all about.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

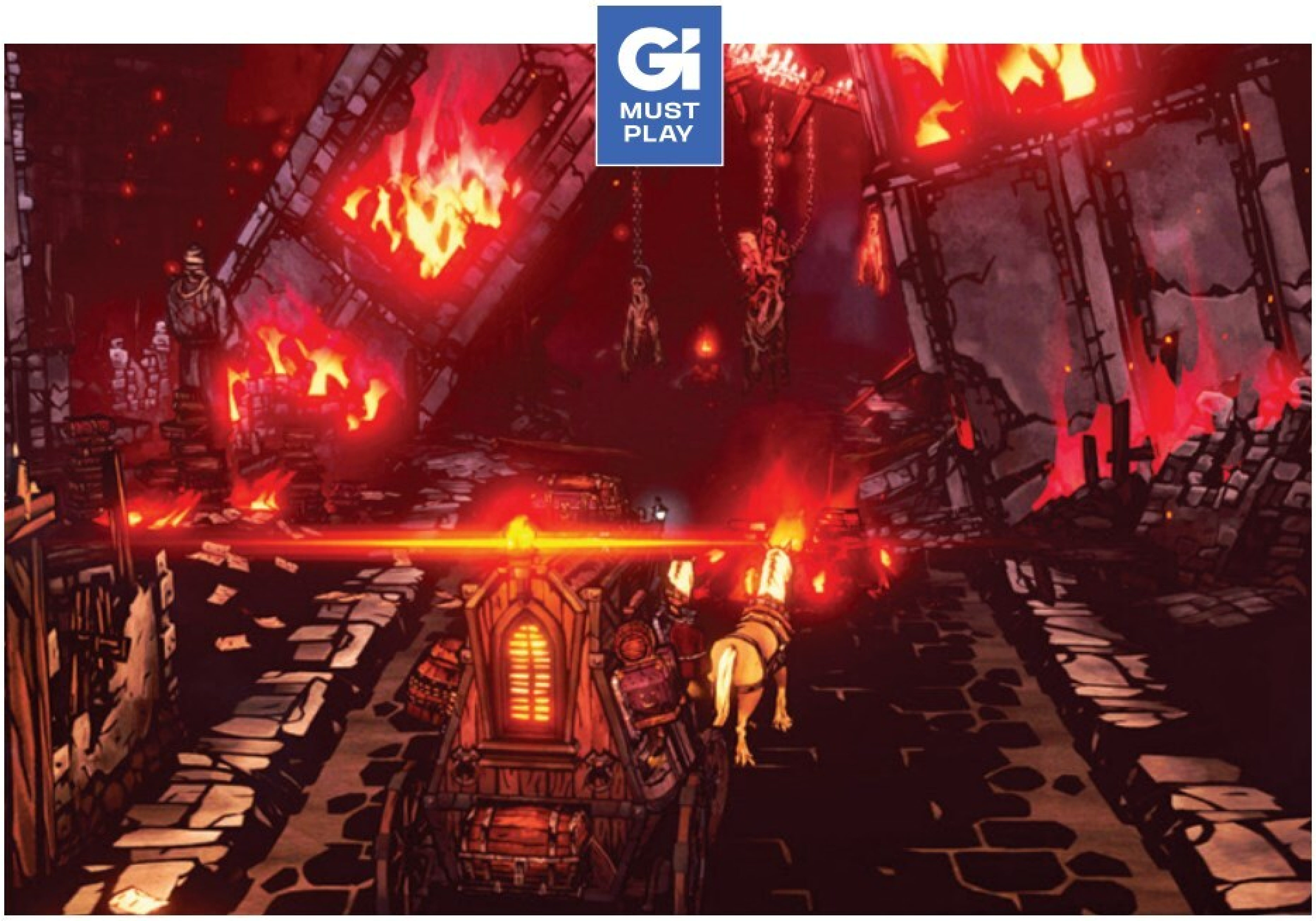
7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (3-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Dambuster Studios **RELEASE** April 21 **RATING** M

DARKEST DUNGEON II

Worth the stress

GI MUST PLAY



Darkest Dungeon II is cruel. A simple miscalculation or bad luck can ruin your two-to-three-hour expedition before the chapter's final boss. There are no checkpoints; if your party dies, it's time to start fresh from the very beginning. Only some unlocked upgrades stay with you. When you have to make tough choices all the time while keeping in mind various systems, this can (and will) be frustrating and nerve-racking. At the same time, Darkest Dungeon II is the most cathartic and rewarding experience since the original in 2016.

Much like its predecessor, you create a party of four distinct heroes who must survive exciting turn-based battles with a focus on position, synergy, and a certain degree of luck. Your attacks have a range of possible damage points they can deal, plus there are buffs and debuffs that give you the chance of missing your shot or earning a critical hit, among other outcomes.

The combat system is hard to master but incredibly satisfying. As you get to know your cast, you dive into the thrilling experience of learning who goes well with whom, in what position, and against which creatures. I spent hours experimenting with the best combinations for my playstyle, trying out new strategies every time. The battles are puzzles, making you feel great when you succeed with your party in one piece. But they can also frustrate you when you deal one less point of damage than you need and receive an unexpected counterattack.

Everything gets more complicated when you add the stress system, the signature core mechanic of the series. When their white gauge is complete, your hero can have a meltdown, losing most of their HP. They can also earn a positive outcome and heal up, though it's less common. If a single meltdown in a difficult encounter can ruin your whole expedition, imagine what it feels like to have five in a row in the same battle. It's a disheartening feeling that should make you stop playing immediately, yet there I was, so angry and fascinated at the same time, willing to try again one more time. This game sunk its hooks into me that deeply.

A new affinity system will show how well your party gets along with each other. This quickly gets tense when you realize that all your small decisions can turn your heroes against themselves, adding negative effects to specific skills. Having to change your complete strategy is both infuriating and a tremendous challenge, one that made me feel fulfilled when I defied the odds and overcame it. Fortunately, this mechanic can also make your heroes good teammates, adding combo attacks and other astonishing surprises.

Apart from fighting, you explore disturbing but beautifully designed regions before reaching the final boss of your expedition. You travel in a Stagecoach, a vehicle that can get damaged by hazardous roads, adding unwanted battles. You also get to choose which path to take, sometimes knowing what to expect and others being completely in the dark.

All these mechanics create an experience I simply cannot get enough of. Even now, 40 hours in, I still want to get back again to refine my team and unlock the rest of the items and upgrades. While some journeys are blatantly unfair, there's also a remarkable achievement in finding balance in something that should be completely chaotic. I wish there were more shortcuts to ease the pain of failing a three-hour run at the end and having to start again. And more user-friendly items in the early stages, which can be extremely overwhelming and will likely deter players, would go a long way.

When I found myself shouting in relief and frenetically raising my fist in the air after a hard battle ends in my favor, I can't deny the following fact: Darkest Dungeon II is a harsh but fantastic game whose white-knuckled battles and hazard-filled exploration will trap you for hours. If you're willing to make the needed sacrifices, it's a journey well worth taking. **BY AXEL NICOLÁS BOSSO**

8.5

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Red Hook Studios **DEVELOPER** Red Hook Studios **RELEASE** May 8 **RATING** T

MINECRAFT LEGENDS

A strategic retreat

Mojang Studios has returned to the crafting table in an attempt to take Minecraft in a bold new direction. Minecraft Legends is an open-world real-time strategy game where you gather resources, build defenses, and summon adorable mercenaries to protect the sanctity of the realm. Instead of the birds-eye perspective often featured in strategy games, Legends opts for a character-focused view, with your hero roaming the landscape on dynamic mounts, sword in hand, using resources and armies to evict factions of evil Piglins, each with combat quirks to overcome. A compelling concept in theory, but this unique take on an iconic franchise can often feel at odds with itself. Minecraft Legends feels caught between the expected complexity of strategy games and the franchise's approachable brand.

Legends' reasonably sized map is full of iconic Minecraft imagery. From packs of wolves wandering across the plains to turtles splashing in ponds, the overworld feels organic and welcoming. Ambient patches of landscape like the aptly named Bouncecaps invited me to think vertically about exploration as they sent my hero flying into the sky. I felt encouraged to test the limits of fall damage in search of untouched areas, making for some unexpected finds and overt slapstick failures.

Across the realm, you'll take down Piglin strongholds with combinations of deadly mobs and defend helpless villages by building walls and towers, all while maintaining your captured bases from random raids. Various defensive and offensive scenarios pushed me to evolve my tactics and choose my upgrades wisely at the Well of Fate, the hero's home base. The game forces you to choose between having extra mobs on the battlefield, more options for structures, or additional resources, so you fine-tune your play style as you progress.

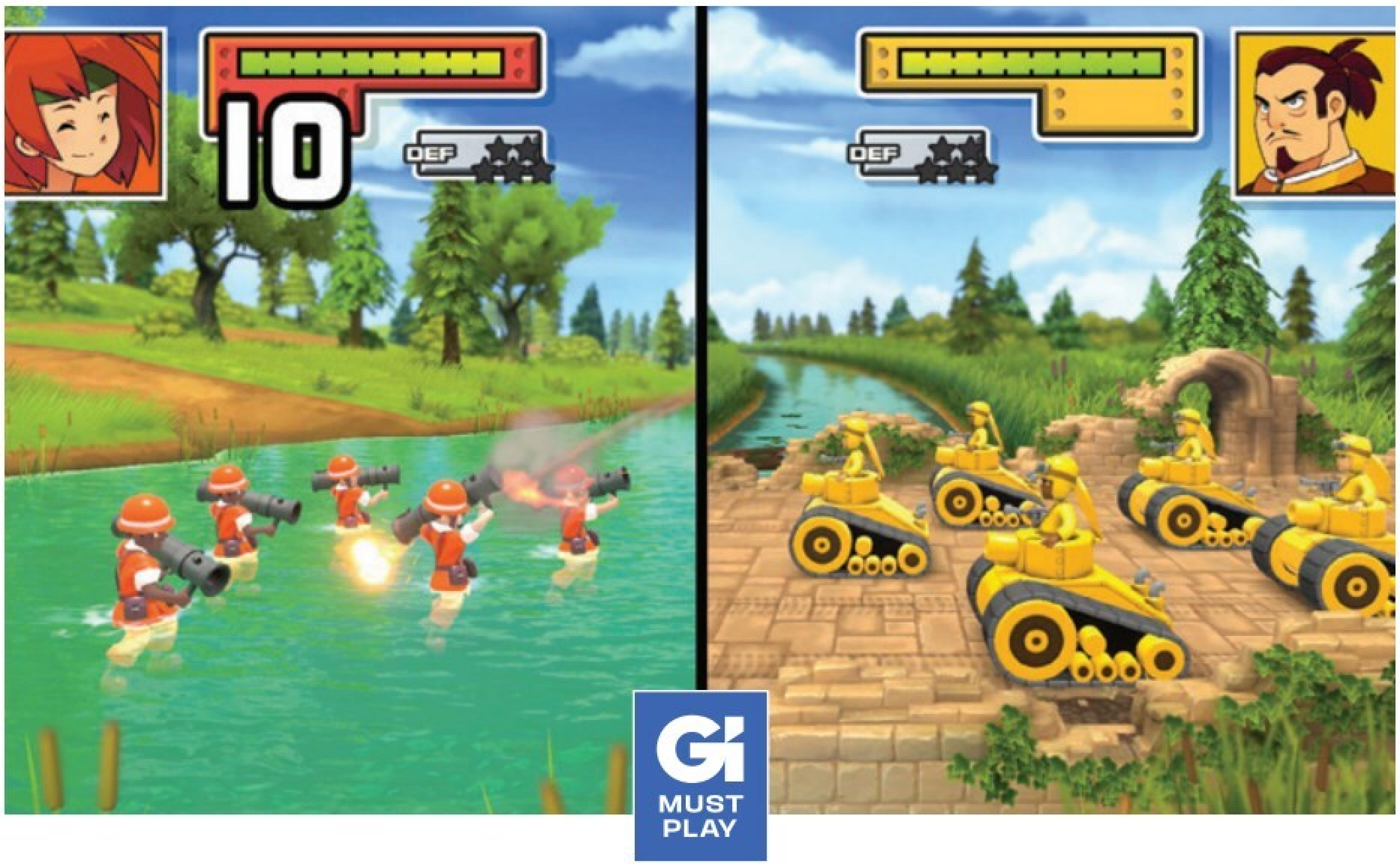
Minecraft Legends succeeds in engaging players to investigate its world by hiding special mobs and tools throughout its procedural landscape. Still, it can struggle to make you feel present and essential in the adventure, primarily due to the perspective shift. My hero was on the ground, manually summoning troops and fighting baddies, but it was my companion sprites, the Allays, that were getting all the upgrades, gathering resources, and building structures. You may yearn to get your hands dirtier in a world that feels so inviting and interactive.

This disconnect also followed me into battle where, instead of feeling like a captain who was storming castles to free the land, I would mostly watch my army whittle away at structures while wandering the outskirts alone. Minecraft Legends' most absorbing moments come when you fight side by side with your mobs to destroy a Piglin portal, so it feels particularly deflating when the game forces you to replenish yourself outside of the action as your troops continue without you. However, I can see some benefit in these maverick systems, as Legends succeeds in twisting strategy game traditions in a way that welcomes players new to the genre.

Minecraft Legends battles to blend its open-world adventuring with the intricacies of real-time strategy, a war that sometimes detracts from the overall fun you can have. Even so, its gorgeous environments and clever world-building inspire familiar creativity that makes up for its growing pains. Where other strategy games feature more profound complexity, Minecraft Legends has heart, and it's hard to resist its charm. Mojang's first expedition into this genre occasionally holds your hand too tight. But when its grip loosens, there's a vibrant world of combat challenges to discover, ultimately making it an enticing endeavor. **BY SARAH THWAITES**

7

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Strategy (8-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Mojang Studios, Blackbird Interactive **RELEASE** April 18 **RATING** E10+



GI MUST PLAY

ADVANCE WARS 1+2: RE-BOOT CAMP

Stronger with age

Nintendo and WayForward took a risk bringing Advance Wars back from the scrap heap with Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp, releasing a set of tactics-heavy games in a genre now defined by character relationships. The remakes change little from the original releases and don't deepen the story or cast, but they don't have to change anything. Advance Wars' unique features are as apparent as ever. If anything, they're made even stronger by the series' extended absence.

Advance Wars is light on story compared to other tactical RPGs. The nations of Wars World are on the cusp of conflict as a sinister figure manipulates them from the shadows. Your job is preventing war from breaking out by... going to war. The setup doesn't warrant too much thought and has big Saturday morning cartoon vibes, a feeling these new updates help heighten. Re-Boot Camp features new toybox-style graphics, a remastered soundtrack, sporadic voice acting, and a slightly tweaked script that brings out the most of every character's personality.

That new cartoon style also helps offset what's otherwise a grim setup, where officers send scores of troops to die in battle without a thought for their welfare. Technically, that's still what happens, but the new look makes each map like a game of toy soldiers, and even resemble a tabletop board when you zoom out.

What hasn't changed is the series' take on the genre, which, more than 20 years after the first game was released, still feels fresh and innovative. Both Advance Wars games blend traditional tactics elements, such as a rock-paper-scissors system of unit strengths and weaknesses, with features typically found in real-time strategy games. Resource and fuel management are critical in Advance Wars, for example, and controlling specific parts of a map is often essential for victory. The attention to detail is so acute that you even have to think about how tires and treads interact with terrain.

Every battle is a tense mixture of smart planning and wild improvisation, where victory feels well-earned – even if you barely manage to clear the objective. Each map has an optimal approach, but the strategic depth and variation mean you can experiment with unorthodox ideas and still earn a high ranking.

The remakes also include a feature that lets you reset your current turn as often as you want. It's a helpful but clunky approach to making both games more approachable. If a choice you made three turns back turns out badly, your only option is to leave the mission and start over. You can increase movement speed and remove animations to save time, but a Fire Emblem-style rewind feature would have been a more elegant solution.

The range of choices may seem overwhelming, but Advance Wars does a superb job of teaching you the basics and even some advanced strategies at a steady pace – although it does this perhaps almost too well. Most of the first game plays like an extended tutorial, where you don't get the full range of tools at your disposal until over halfway through the campaign.

Advance Wars 2 is a stronger and more confident game, however. This time, you control different COs from every nation, so each mission requires a thoughtful new approach with their strengths and foibles in mind. It's a brilliant exercise in iteration, with a well-designed set of new officers, clever new CO powers, and complex, sometimes uncompromising, maps that make the most of the series' unique mechanics.

Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp might not include much new material, but it presents a strong case that classic games don't always have to change to be relevant again. Sometimes, they just need a second chance.

BY JOSH BROADWELL

8.5

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Strategy (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** WayForward Technologies, Nintendo
RELEASE April 21 **RATING** E10+

STRAYED LIGHTS

Strayed Lights is short, sweet, and mostly excels at what it asks players to do. Its unique parry-required combat brings something new to the table, and I enjoyed nearly every instance of it, especially in the larger boss-fight set-pieces sprinkled through the journey. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Embers **DEVELOPER** Embers
RELEASE April 25 **RATING** T

HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST: BURNING SHORES

Horizon Forbidden West: Burning Shores serves fans a substantial dessert that brings the main course of the campaign to a satisfying close. A dangerous new sandbox and a compelling story await Aloy, offering a nice wrap-up that also provides some tantalizing glimpses into the future. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Guerrilla Games
RELEASE April 18 **RATING** T

TERRA NIL

While the peaceful nature and serene tone are sometimes interrupted by uneven mechanics, Terra Nil is a worthwhile experience for those looking for a new twist on the sim genre. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

7.5

PLATFORM PC • iOS • Android
STYLE 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Free Lives **RELEASE** March 28
RATING NR (PC), 4+ (iOS, Android)

EA SPORTS PGA TOUR

EA Sports PGA Tour is a game at odds with whether it wants to compete with rival 2K's realism or veer closer to its own more arcade roots, and in the process, lands its first drive on this new round in the rough. **BY MATT PAPROCKI**

6

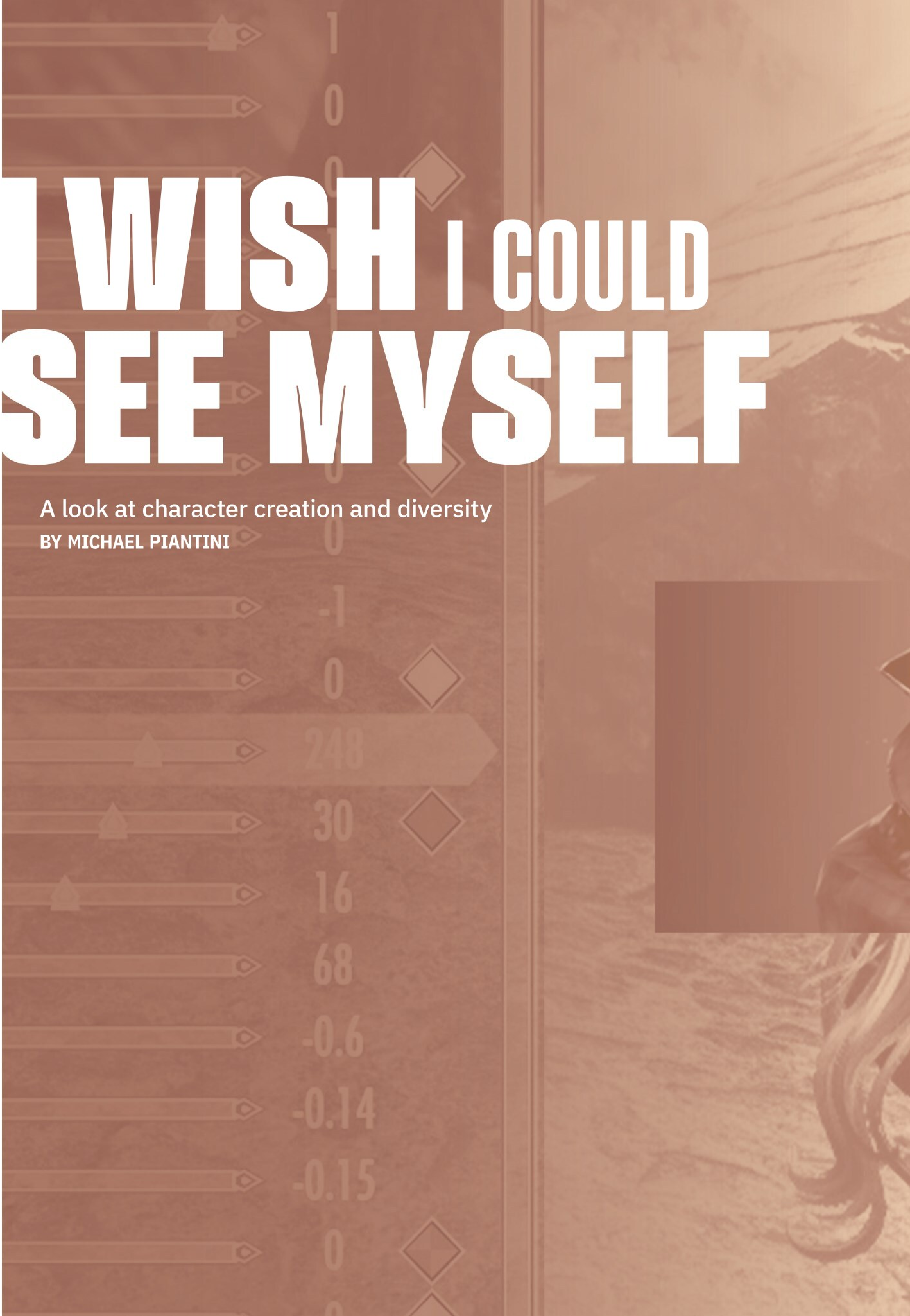
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Sports (16-Player Online)
PUBLISHER EA Sports **DEVELOPER** EA Tiburon
RELEASE April 7 **RATING** E

TRON: IDENTITY

While I applaud Tron: Identity's unique structure, I never found myself drawn in and engrossed in the unfolding story. Everything feels authentic to the Tron universe, and fans like myself should appreciate new wrinkles in the setting. **BY MATT MILLER** ■

7

PLATFORM Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Bithell Games **DEVELOPER** Bithell Games
RELEASE April 11 **RATING** T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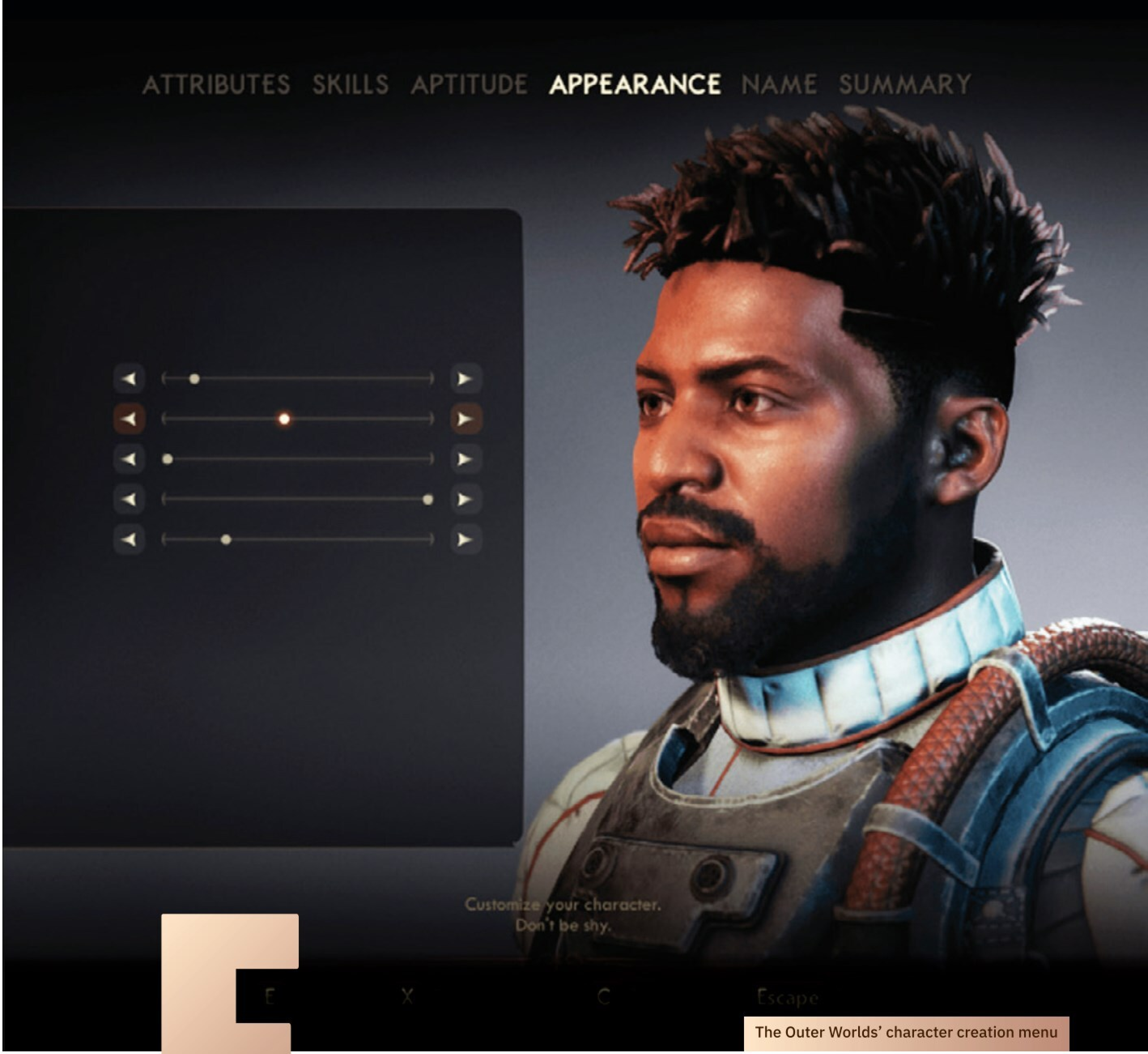
I WISH I COULD SEE MYSELF

A look at character creation and diversity

BY MICHAEL PIANTINI



The Outer Worlds' character creation menu

For most of my life, I've had difficulty seeing myself in character creators. In both Mass Effect and Fallout: New Vegas, I can give my character a dark skin complexion matching my own, but the closest to my hair is a variation of an afro (whether it be short or big). The type of facial hair is usually either a perfect full beard or types of mustaches, with no imperfections or kinky textures. And facial features' only way to mark ethnicity is mainly in the eyes or stereotyped voice lines ("What's up, ese?"). To be a Black, indigenous person of color (or BIPOC) that isn't ethnically ambiguous is compromising your virtual self-image. You can make some idea of yourself, but it's not *really* you. So, I went diving around the gaming world to understand this issue better and see where developers have made efforts to make a change.

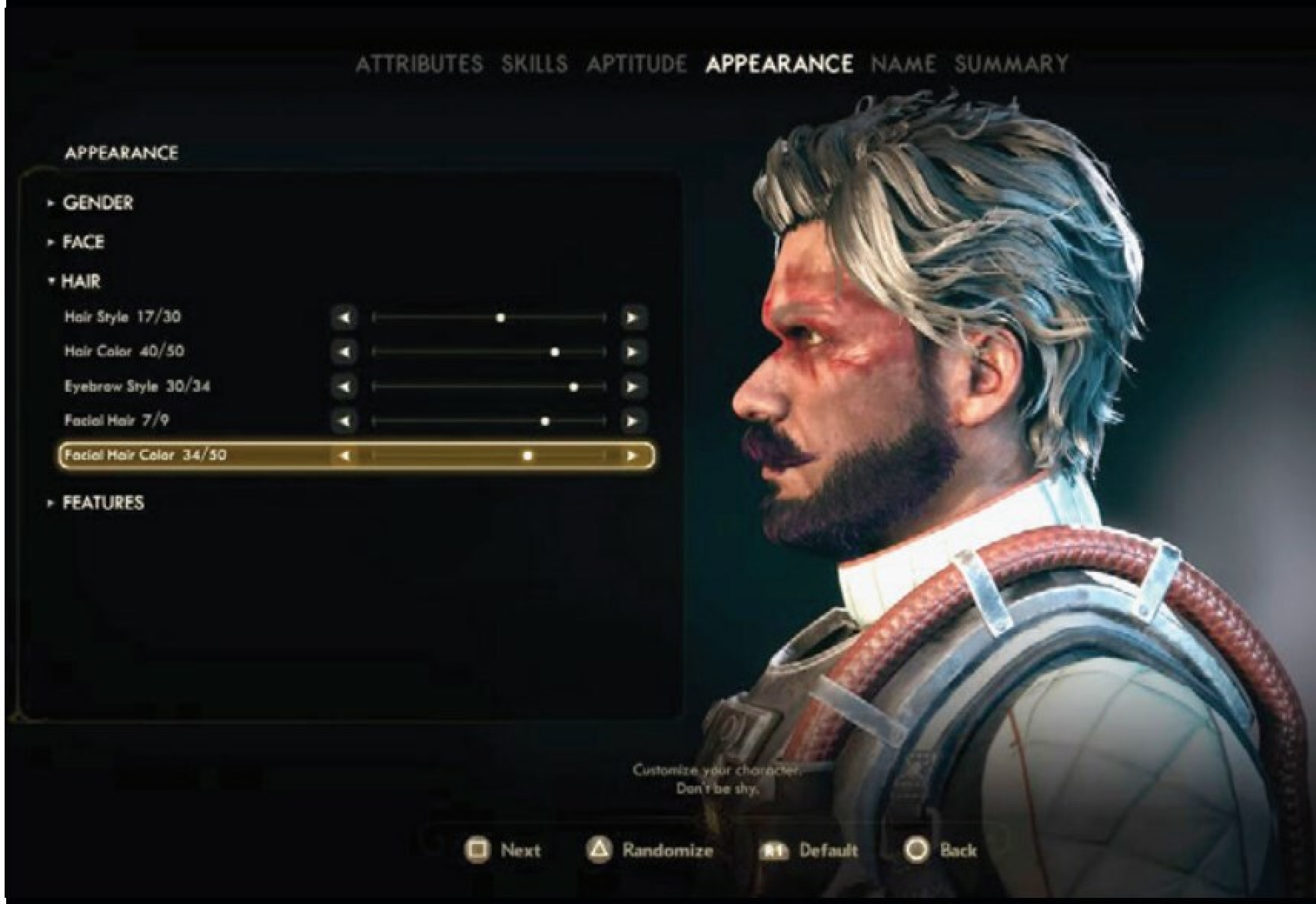
There isn't just one person in charge of character creators. Rather, it's under the entire art department. "When we are building the [character] system, we're trying to balance two things: cost versus limitless possibilities," Obsidian art director Daniel Alpert says. All the clothing, character models, hairstyles, and so on that go into creation tools are part of the budget making up the entire game. For instance, in The Outer Worlds, Alpert's team used heads from characters throughout the world map to have a neutral base for players to create whomever they wanted. "All the player-facing tools we make, we give to the designers and narrative team." This helps streamline production and make development more transparent to players.

When using the character creator itself, some disparities become clear. You can select preset heads to cycle through and adjust eyebrow height, nose length, ears width, et cetera. However, you can't pick your eyebrows. Locking the eyebrows to the selected preset head is an unusual decision but not the end of the world. Gender doesn't limit hairstyles and facial hair, so the combinations are plentiful.

A highlight is the impressive textures for kinky and curly hairstyles. Out of 30 stylings, about five are distinctively Black in their characteristics. While limited in choices, the visual fidelity speaks volumes for the players able to see themselves. Many Twitch clips show people reacting to what feels like authentic self-portraits. "That... that's like me. Like, that is my hair," said Josh Boykin of Intelligame on stream around Outer World's 2019 release. Boykin's reaction stems from video games' long-standing indifference to portraying believable Black characters. Streamer DeejayKnight also reacted to him making his character during the launch: "To have hair with my texture, and I can even add the highlight... I have no words."

> "You can make some idea of yourself, but it's not really you

Of course, this issue isn't limited to feeling represented in your race; body type and gender identity have become more inclusive. CD Projekt Red art director Paweł Mielniczuk said, "It's all about letting them [the players] feel like they're a part of the world. In order to do that, players need to have the option to design their character so that it best represents them." For Cyberpunk 2077, Mielniczuk's team made 43 heads (22 female, 21 male), creating a wealth of options to mix and match. However, these do not include sliders like Outer Worlds. Of the 42 categories to change body and appearance, these are all premade choices. Meaning it's on the developer to ensure the possibilities for inclusive representation of bodies and races are present. Notably, there is no option to be overweight. Yes, the player character V is a mercenary who would probably be muscular and lean. But this is also a fictional world with cybernetic technology that makes people immune to damage. To rationalize why V couldn't be a heavy-set character is a delusional maelstrom for the sake of fatphobia. Even more so, this is the same game that lets you (to no effect) circumcise your penis. Nonetheless, this absent feature leaves those wanting a bigger character without options. Having said all that, the options shipped with the game on release make for a gender-diverse portrait of whomever a player's character will be.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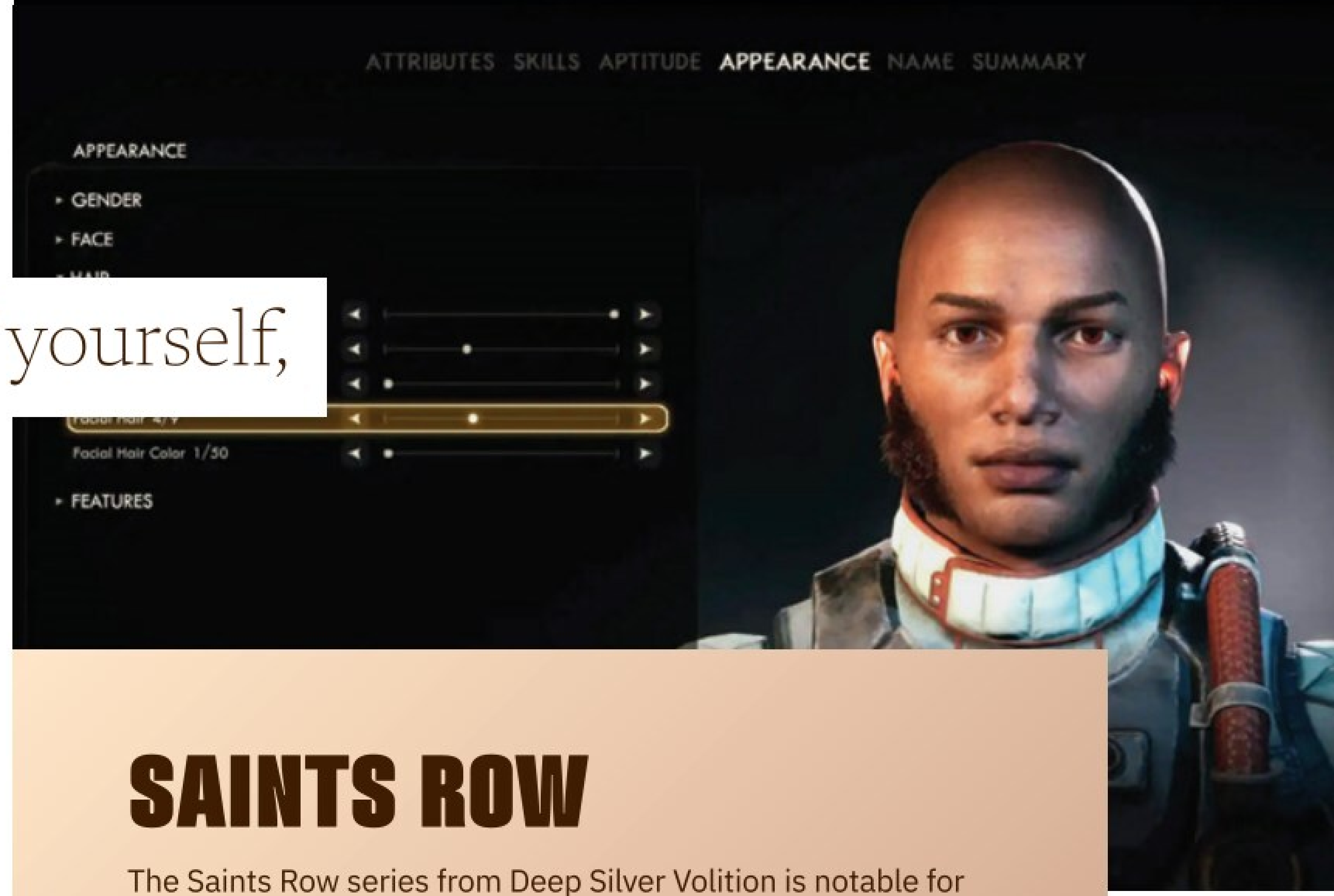
FEATURES
Customize your character.
Don't be shy.
Next
Randomize
Default
Back

Hair Style 17/30
Hair Color 40/50
Eyebrow Style 30/34
Facial Hair 7/9
Facial Hair Color 34/50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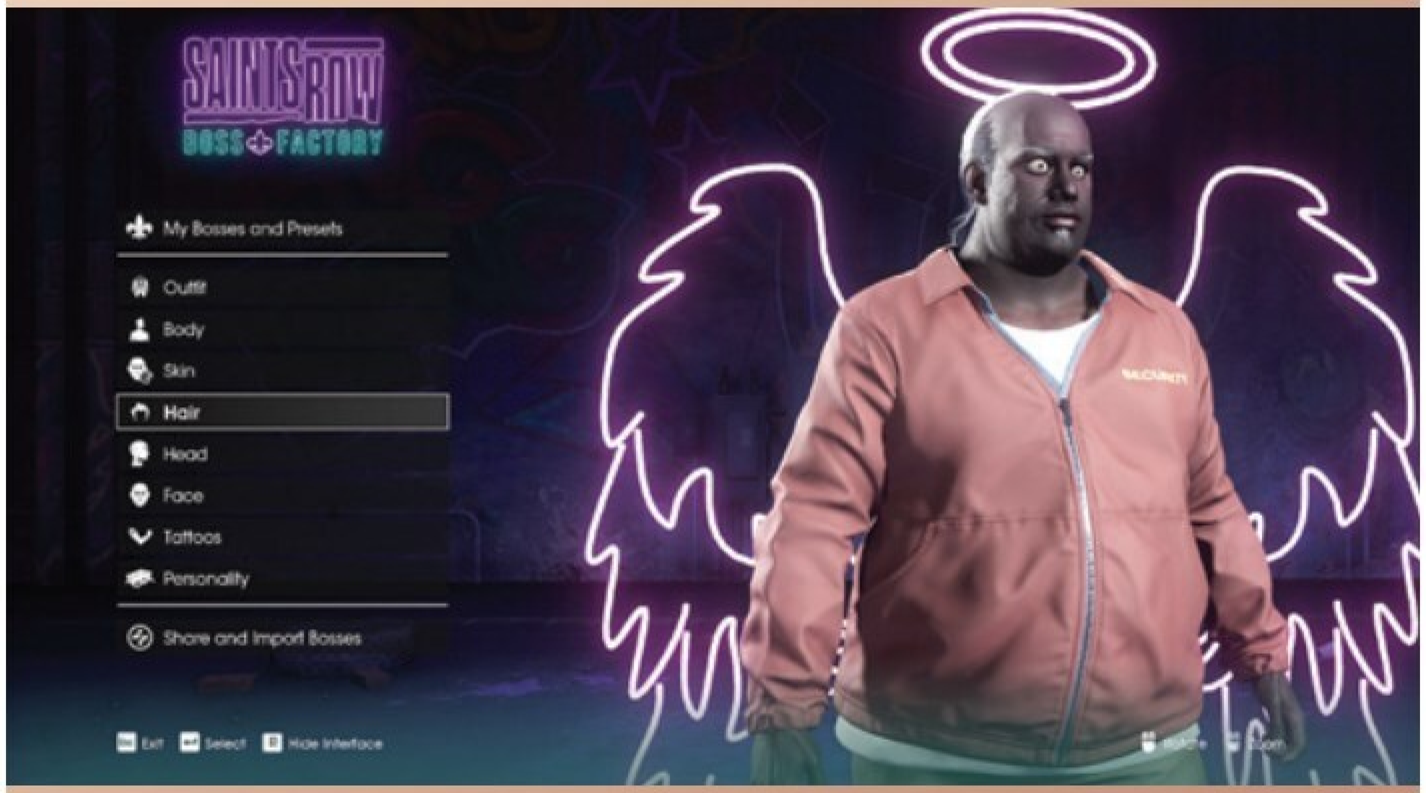
FACE
FEATURES

Facial Hair 4/9
Facial Hair Color 1/50

SAINTS ROW

The Saints Row series from Deep Silver Volition is notable for centering on player-driven expression. The latest entry, 2022's Saints Row, has a significant pool of options to make your character look however you want. Hairstyles have variations of fades, braids, and afros that are remarkably vivid in their textures and allow players to be generously curvy. The character creator was even released prior to the game's launch to give players time to create before diving into the full game.


SAINTS ROW
BOSS FACTORY
My Bosses and Presets
Outfit
Body
Skin
Hair
Head
Face
Tattoos
Personality
Share and Import Bosses
Exit
Select
Hide Interface

> “The culture of video games has dramatically shifted in a promising way

In both games, it’s clear that triple-A developers are adapting to the ever-growing demand for inclusive representations of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities. That’s a good thing even though there are caveats. Games (especially those in sci-fi/fantasy settings) are scenarios for would-be worlds that we could live in. They could and should reflect the reality in which they are made. Black and brown people are real; nonbinary and queer people are real, so often, it feels as though developers are relegated to making an effort to appease these groups for good publicity. Alpart spoke about a moment during Outer Worlds’ development:

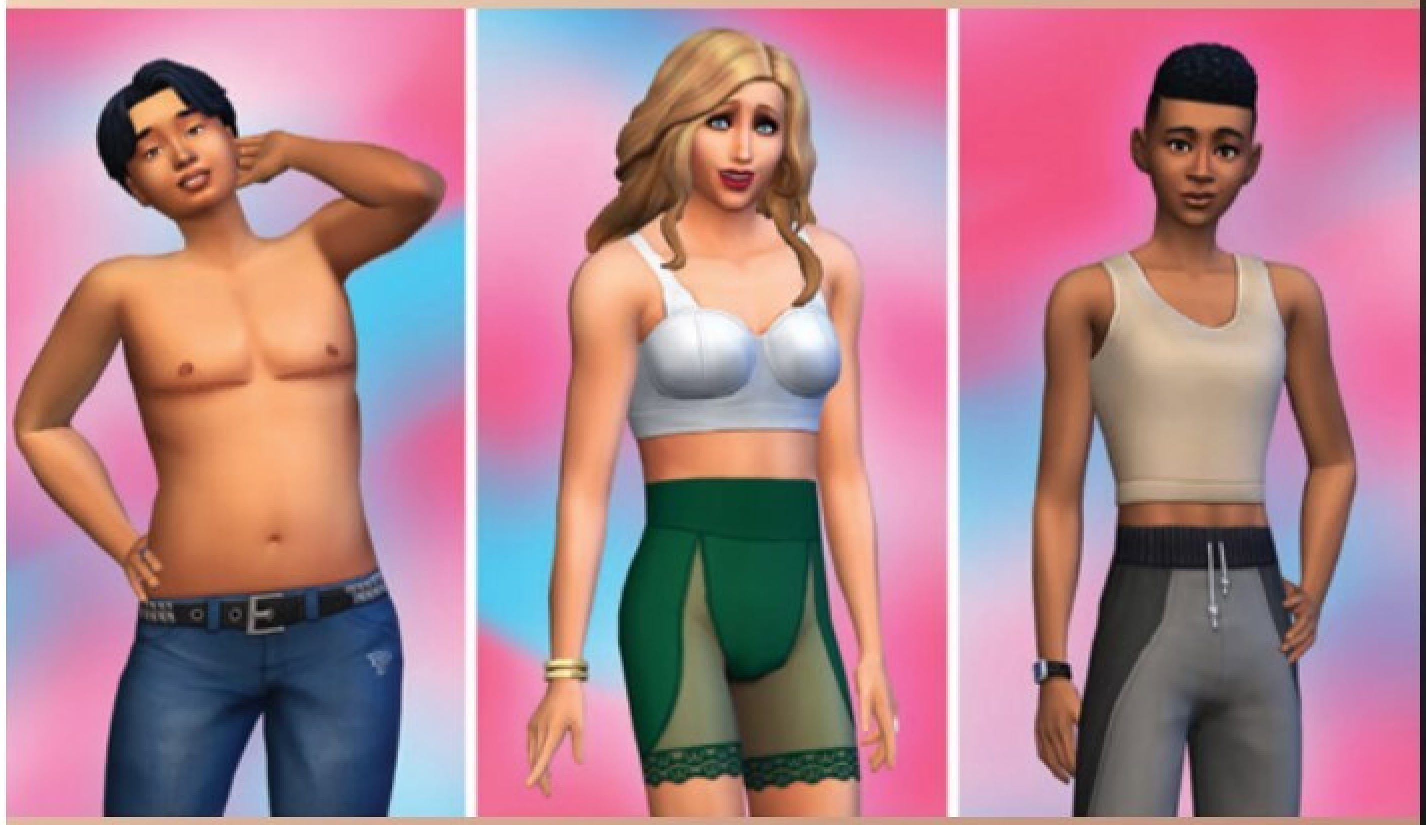
“We were looking at a town and felt it was too much of the same, not necessarily of one ethnic group or another. And we took that time to make sure that there was more representation in and around the town. Even now, when we’re looking at current systems and crowds of characters, we’re trying to make sure it feels natural. Rather than saying this one group is more dominant than another, we say, ‘How do we make it feel natural?’ If I’m walking down the city [in real life], I want to see that natural look like I would want to see in my game.”

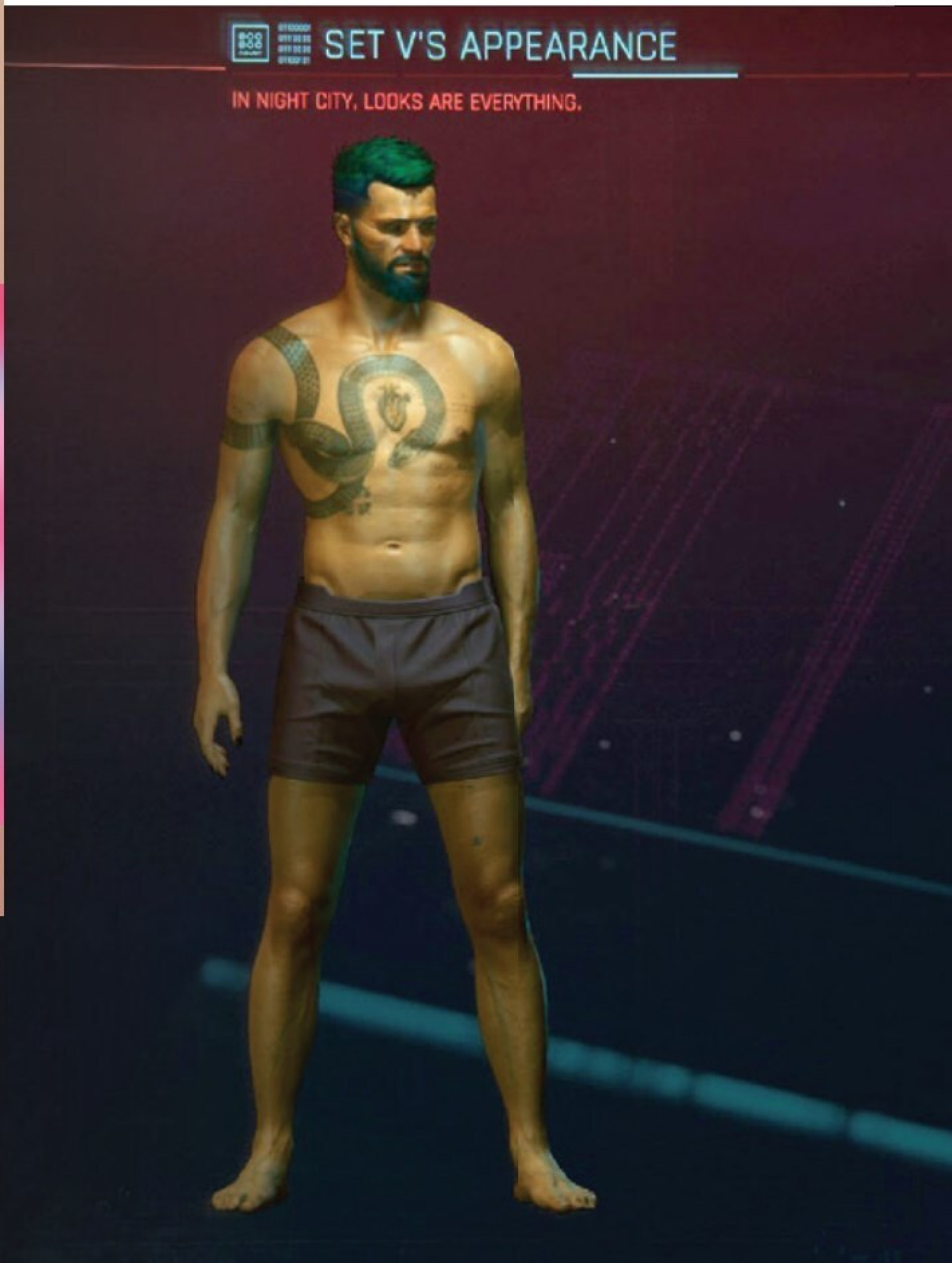
This dividing principle influences how many character creators lack exceptional features for BIPOC folks. What Alpart describes is an intentional method of designing the narrative world to make it a believable space. You could look at the Pacifica District in Cyberpunk 2077 as an allusion to real-world redlining and racially motivated segregation that perpetually happens throughout the United States. Knowing that there is a large population of Haitian and Caribbean people in Pacifica, Mielniczuk’s team had to ensure players could create similar-looking characters. “We had to keep in mind certain technological limitations we had at the time, regulating the number of skin tones and unique crowd heads we could fit in without going overboard on available resources or different NPCs being able to spawn at the same time in certain spots,” he says.

When looking at a game and seeing a lack of a certain ethnic or social group, it would be fair to assume

THE SIMS 4

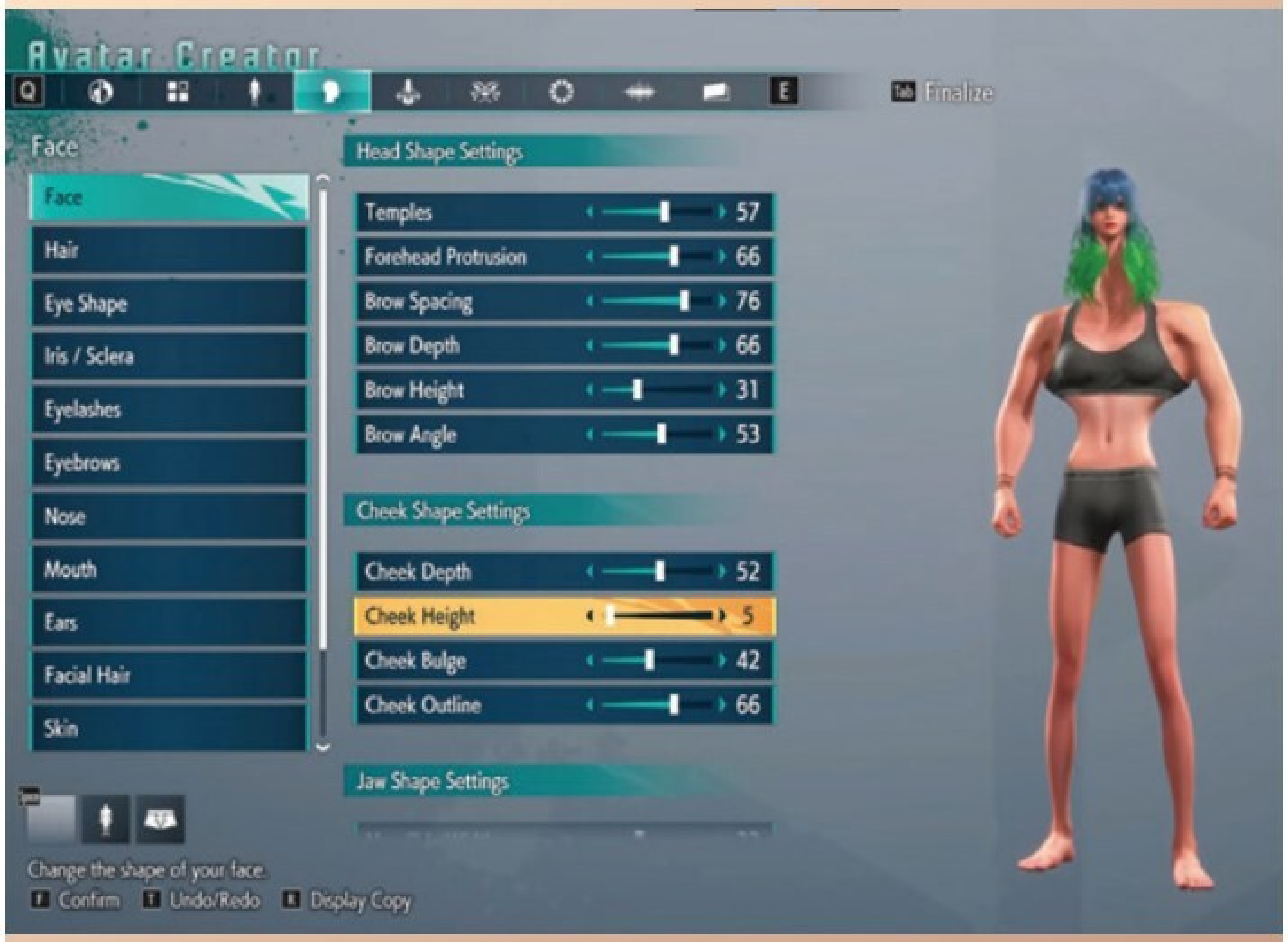
A recent update to The Sims 4 includes more options for creating gender non-conforming and nonbinary sims, not to mention the hundreds of other things you can do with your sim. Seeing something like the scars from top surgery or a glucose meter for a diabetic on a virtual avatar is staggering because it is so real.





the developers did not imagine a world where they exist. This is not to say that the developer is malicious with this absence, but it says a lot about what type of people they interact with. Think about the Final Fantasy games and the ways Black and brown folks are portrayed (if at all). Even with the upcoming Final Fantasy XVI having an opportunity to make a multiethnic world, producer Naoki Yoshida received backlash when he told *IGN*, “The story we are telling is fantasy, yes, but it is also rooted in reality.” Square Enix is a Japanese developer. Seeing a person with dark skin in Japan is infrequent enough that the collective image of Blackness likely originates from popular media.

Video games, in reputation, have been about being a cis-gendered white male with washboard abs, lush straight hair, and a perfectly connecting beard. That image I have of a video game protagonist is how it has always been. But at a snail’s pace, things *are* changing. The culture of video games has dramatically shifted in a promising way. Players crave more inclusive representations beyond seeing themselves; it’s more of an affirmation. Affirming who they are and the world they live in is worth considering. Seeing myself as an average-looking Afro-Latino man with a receding hairline and a stocky build is how I operate daily. Seeing myself like that in a video game I spend hundreds playing is the irrefutable dream of character creation. ■



Head Shape Settings

Temples 57
Forehead Protrusion 66
Brow Spacing 76
Brow Depth 66
Brow Height 31
Brow Angle 53

Cheek Shape Settings

Cheek Depth 52
Cheek Height 5
Cheek Bulge 42
Cheek Outline 66

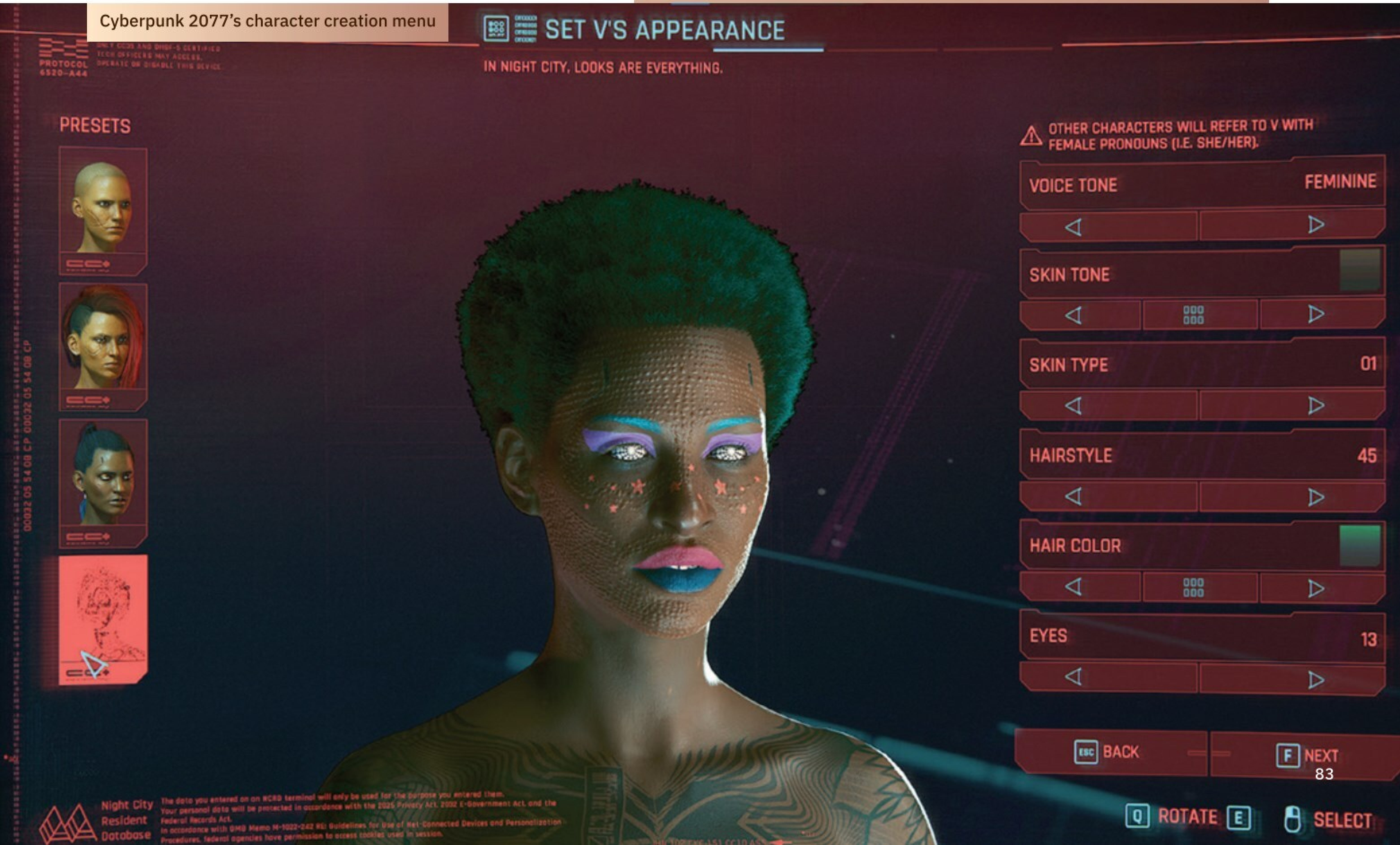
Jaw Shape Settings

Change the shape of your face

STREET FIGHTER 6

Capcom’s upcoming Street Fighter 6 is incomparable in terms of character creators because it takes proportions to literal extremes. Based on the closed beta, you can adjust a portion of the body and change your character’s face to the smallest of details. I have never seen such a display of creative possibility given to players in such a way. It can best be described as digital playdough.

Cyberpunk 2077’s character creation menu



SET V'S APPEARANCE

IN NIGHT CITY, LOOKS ARE EVERYTHING.

OTHER CHARACTERS WILL REFER TO V WITH FEMALE PRONOUNS (I.E. SHE/HER).

VOICE TONE FEMININE
SKIN TONE
SKIN TYPE 01
HAIRSTYLE 45
HAIR COLOR
EYES 13

ONE LAST THING

THE ART OF THE LOGO

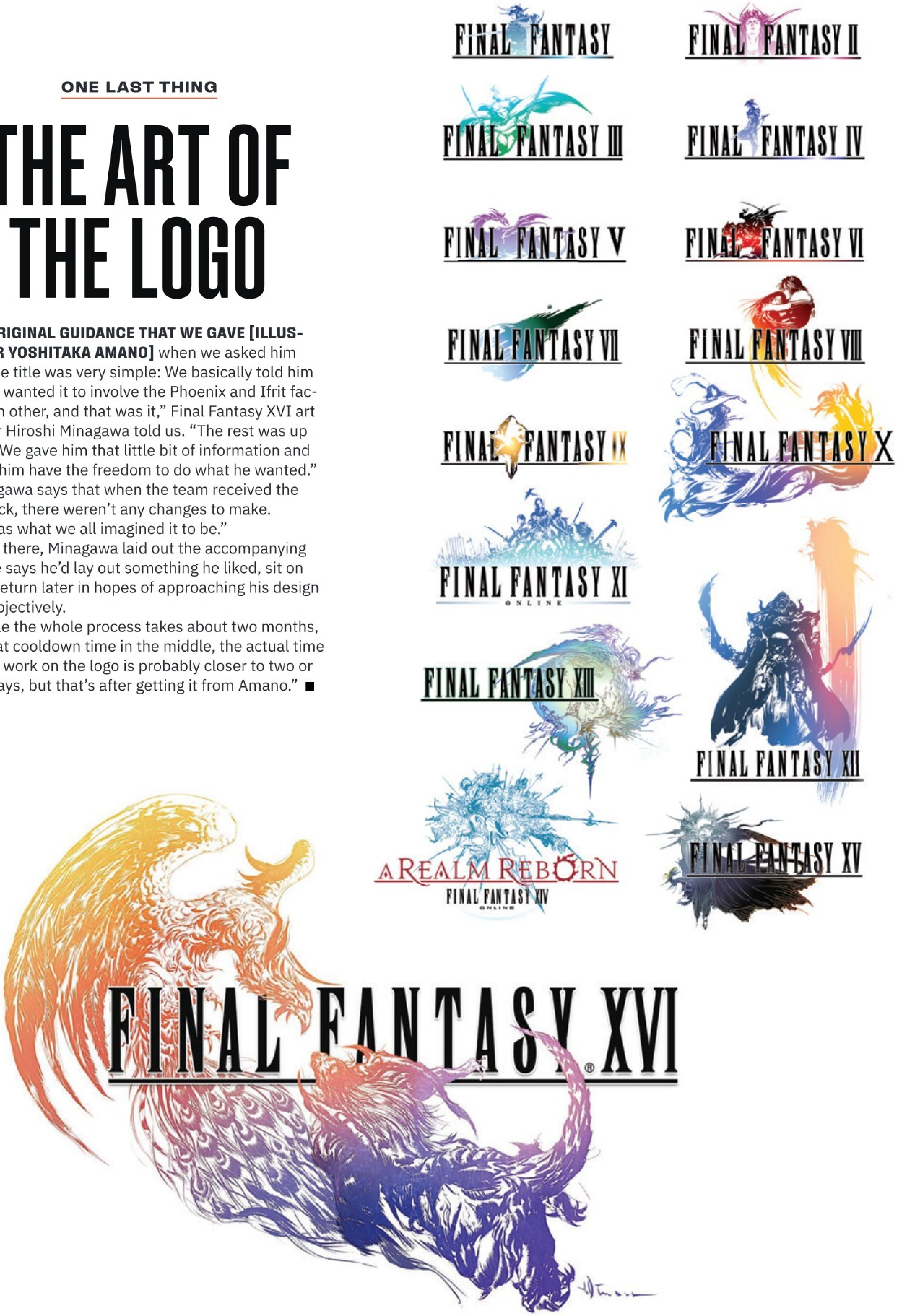
"THE ORIGINAL GUIDANCE THAT WE GAVE [ILLUSTRATOR YOSHITAKA AMANO] when we asked him to do the title was very simple: We basically told him that we wanted it to involve the Phoenix and Ifrit facing each other, and that was it," Final Fantasy XVI art director Hiroshi Minagawa told us. "The rest was up to him. We gave him that little bit of information and just let him have the freedom to do what he wanted."

Minagawa says that when the team received the logo back, there weren't any changes to make.

"It was what we all imagined it to be."

From there, Minagawa laid out the accompanying text. He says he'd lay out something he liked, sit on it, and return later in hopes of approaching his design more objectively.

"While the whole process takes about two months, with that cooldown time in the middle, the actual time that we work on the logo is probably closer to two or three days, but that's after getting it from Amano." ■


FINAL FANTASY
FINAL FANTASY II
FINAL FANTASY III
FINAL FANTASY IV
FINAL FANTASY V
FINAL FANTASY VI
FINAL FANTASY VII
FINAL FANTASY VIII
FINAL FANTASY IX
FINAL FANTASY X
FINAL FANTASY XI
ONLINE
FINAL FANTASY XIII
FINAL FANTASY XII
A REALM REBORN
FINAL FANTASY XIV
ONLINE
FINAL FANTASY XV
FINAL FANTASY XVI

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TURKEY BREAST

OH, HILL YEAH.™

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HILLSHIRE FARM
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